The Shade of Old Trees

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The Shade of Old Trees

by Kryal

Summary

> *"We rest in the shade of trees our ancestors planted."*
>
> They called the man in the ice Yiling Laozu, after a folk hero associated with the town in the foothills of the mountains where he was found.
>
> No one expected him to be *alive*!

Notes

> Inspiration for this fic goes to the fic *Alexandria*, by LilyMaxwell. Note, however, that this is a very, very different sort of story. *Alexandria* was written to be atmospheric, and I don't do atmospheric as a general rule. (It also comes off as very CQL-based. I have not seen any of CQL and frankly don't expect to; I work from the novel, with little tidbits of donghua and manhua thrown in, mostly for pretty visuals.) But my plotbunnies latched onto the premise and *would not* let it go, because I've had a fascination with Rip Van Winkle-ish scenarios since before I even knew that fanfiction existed.
>
> Note that this story is a bit different from my usual fare. Anyone familiar with my other stories knows that I'm partial to action stories and case fics, which tend to be very compact in their plotting because they are focused on a specific challenge. This story is more what Japanese light novels call the Slow Life genre: a slower pace, larger time frame, and a lot of plot coming from the small things that are part of daily living; the focus is far more on sandbox-style exploration of the setting. I'm me, so there will absolutely be action elements, but I'm also experimenting with going outside my writing comfort zone on this one, because plotbunnies will plotbunny…
>
> Speaking of which… for plot reasons, this story pretty much had to be at least nominally set in modern China. Which got awkward, because I've never been to China, nor do I know very much about what daily life is like in the modern day. I did what research I could, but it often felt like every time I dug into something, I was getting contradictory answers, and almost all of them from the perspective of outsiders looking in and advice to tourists. (Didn't help that I was smack in the middle of finishing my dissertation and was using the writing of this primarily as stress relief.) So… well. I did my best, but I'm going into this unfortunately aware that inaccuracies are going to happen. Which almost made me decide to just not post this at all, but.

Also, wordcount warning. The first draft of this fic was *350,000 words long*.

(And 36K of that was me geeking out in the notes, so please heed the Ridiculously Long Notes tag!)

As with all my stories, I have a complete draft in hand at this point. I'll try to post each new chapter on a weekly basis!

Chapter 1: Prologue: Yiling Laozu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They called him *Yiling Laozu*, after a folk hero associated with the town in the foothills of the mountains where he was found.

When the word first got out to the public, that hikers who ventured dangerously close to the mountaintop glaciers too early in the season had barely escaped being killed when a great piece of ice calved off from the glacier, only to discover the frozen body of a man trapped in the clear ice that was uncovered, it caused a minor stir. Ancient bodies were always a subject of fascination, and ice mummies in particular, but a body estimated to date from somewhere around the fifth or sixth centuries didn't have nearly the cachet of, say, one from the Stone Age. Especially when most of the reading public outside of China had no concept of what that even meant; even most within China would only have the vague understanding that it fell within the chaotic period between the fall of the Han and the reunification of China with the rise of the Sui. The scientific community was more interested, of course, but the location was difficult to access, the accounts so obviously exaggerated…

Then the photo was published.

It was a beautiful image (and instantly made the career of the enterprising photographer who had taken it). The afternoon sun had set the clear ice alight until it almost seemed to be glowing, and at its heart was a beautiful young man, dressed in ancient robes and wearing a sword, so perfectly preserved that the viewer could be forgiven for thinking that he was only sleeping.

It was a *sensation*.

Practically overnight, an entire cottage industry sprang up for the thousands who wanted to come and see Yiling Laozu in his ice tomb. Historians and scientists alike marveled over the level of preservation – historians for the thousands of tiny details to be studied, scientists for the impossible level of preservation and the complete lack of damage despite the crushing pressure of the ice. Yiling Laozu merchandise appeared throughout the world – to say nothing of the sudden emergence of Yiling Laozu-themed fiction that swiftly swept through the publishing world. Some of it was even readable.

The trouble started almost immediately.

For one thing, the town of Yiling was a small rural settlement, less than five thousand even at its peak and swiftly depopulated in recent years as most of the younger generations struck out for the cities in search of employment. It had neither the infrastructure nor the human resources to host the vast numbers of tourists expecting food and lodgings and entertainment – and many of the townspeople, who had taken the discovery of Yiling Laozu to heart with proprietary pride, were offended by this sudden invasion of tourists come to gape at him.

In addition, the glacier where Yiling Laozu rested was high and largely inaccessible, with no easy path to reach it. There was also the ever-present danger of rockslides and avalanches, especially because it was so close to where the ice advanced and retreated every year, wearing away at the sides of the mountain. It was not long at all before several groups had needed to be air-lifted out after accidents or simply getting lost, and finally several deaths forced the authorities to crack down – somewhat effectively – on expeditions up the mountain.

More concerning to the scientific community were the observations about the rapid degradation of the glacier, both due to human passage and due to the fact that the newly exposed ice, lacking the protective cover of white snow and exposed to the sun for much of the day, was beginning to melt. There were even concerns raised that, given that the clear ice meant the sun's rays could easily reach through it to the man's body, he might begin thawing *inside* the ice before the ice itself had time to melt. A reflective cover was quickly set up to attempt to stall the process, while debates and arguments raged between proponents of leaving Yiling Laozu in place and those who wanted him removed from the mountain to a place where he could be safely preserved and more easily studied.

Ultimately, the argument for careful removal won out – largely because an expedition sent to assess the condition of the ice discovered that someone had attempted to crudely chisel their way through the ice while the world argued, and everyone was forced to agree that attempting some sort of security arrangement in such a remote location to prevent a repeat attempt would be both impractical and likely ineffective.

Having the prestigious Cloud Recesses University take responsibility for the project helped settle any remaining objections – especially from the people of Yiling, who had been bristling at the thought of *their* Laozu being locked away in the vault of some foreign university. Even if, realistically, the Cloud Recesses were equally inaccessible, especially to simple farmers.

The entire process took months, with careful cores being taken from the ice for dating and to assess the structural integrity (as well as looking for some explanation for the impossible level of preservation), and then the painstaking process of carving out the piece of ice holding Yiling Laozu without causing any more damage to the glacier or the mountain than absolutely necessary. To say nothing of then *transporting* the massive piece of ice safely to the university and its specially-built, thermally-controlled storage facility. Ultimately, the transport had been handled using military transport helicopters, to the wagging of more than a few tongues.

Once Yiling Laozu was safely in place, of course, the debates continued. Most of the public wanted Yiling Laozu on display, open for human eyes to wonder at. Researchers wanted more restricted access – but *access*, to study and make detailed observations through the ice. And, of course, there were always the voices arguing that now that the body was safely in a research facility, where modern preservation methods could take the place of a fluke of nature, it should be thawed and opened up to more invasive studies, so that the man's belongings could be catalogued and studied in more detail, and the body itself could be assessed for information about ancient life, diet, grooming – and, of course, the mystery of its preservation.

When the university announced the decision to thaw Yiling Laozu, the international community *exploded*.

Accusations began pouring in that the decision to remove him from the glacier had never been more than a ploy to side-step the stakeholders who wanted the man preserved as he was. Yiling Laozu fever was still running high – it had even gained momentum, to the point that a Yiling Laozu convention had been organized and had met for several years in a row, first in Yiling and then in the town of Caiyi, near the university. Within less than a day of the announcement, the first protestors started gathering outside the university gates. Their numbers quickly swelled, with people flying in from across the globe to participate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many were young women (and a not insignificant number of young men) drawn to the fairytale romanticism of a beautiful prince sleeping inside an eternal prison of ice.

But not all of them. The town of Yiling sent a formal delegation to protest the university's decision, arguing that they had only agreed to Yiling Laozu's removal to ensure his protection, and accusing the university of acting in bad faith. Many people in the scholarly community objected as well, with historians pointing out that, given the extensive documentary and archaeological evidence available for the time period in question, there was very little to be gained by conducting more invasive and potentially destructive research – especially in light of Yiling Laozu's uniqueness and the historical, cultural and aesthetic value of preserving him as he was. A petition even began making the rounds to declare World Heritage status for Yiling Laozu, to ensure his continued preservation.

Lan Wangji strongly suspected that his uncle's determination to go ahead with the plan to thaw Yiling Laozu had a great deal to do with the latter argument. A scientific argument, he might have accepted – after all, Lan Qiren had frequently expounded at length over the limited inferences one could draw from a unique specimen. But to have *his* decisions questioned on the basis of *inherent cultural and aesthetic value*? And not even by scholars, but by international bureaucrats, many of whom had not the least actual *interest* in Chinese history and heritage?

That smacked of *romanticism*. The one thing guaranteed to drive Lan Qiren to a raging fury.

To be honest – and Lan Wangji tried to be, not only with the spoken word but with himself as well – he harbored certain unfilial suspicions regarding why his uncle had seen fit to include *him* in the select group of researchers allowed to be present for the final thawing process. Oh, on paper he was a "Historical Culture and Language Expert," present in case questions should come up regarding the relative importance and cultural significance of the things Yiling Laozu carried on his person, should the thawing process destabilize something beyond viable preservation. His degrees in history and literature did technically qualify him for the role. Technically.

He knew that many of the archaeologists, bioanthropologists, scientists and technicians on the team thought his inclusion was nepotism, although at least most of them did not seem to hold that against him. And he would grant the point. His uncle was enough of the old guard to consider the inclusion of his nephews as his just due as head of the project. Personally, however, Lan Wangji strongly suspected that this was another of his uncle's ongoing attempts

to rebuke him for not only pursuing the *barely* acceptable fields of history and literature, but daring to delve into a secondary degree in *folklore*.

Suffice to say that his uncle had had *opinions* when that carefully not-mentioned detail had come to light.

"Cultivators! Ghosts and giant monsters! Magic powers! Immortality! Superstitious wish-fulfillment nonsense!"

Still. For all he had mixed feelings about the project – and his inclusion in it – Lan Wangji felt that he should be here. If Yiling Laozu was to die a second death of sorts today, removed from the strange stasis of his preservation in the ice, then he deserved at least one person present who was thinking of him as a human being who had once lived and breathed, rather than as a priceless historic specimen.

Two people, he corrected himself, feeling skinny fingers close on the sleeve of the lab coat everyone was required to wear, even though they were all in a separate observation room next to the lab where the procedure was actually taking place.

"You don't have to stay if you do not want to," he said quietly.

Wen Yuan shook his head fiercely, although his distress was obvious from the way his lips were pressed together in a thin, uneven line. Not surprising. Truth be told, Lan Wangji had wondered whether or not to even mention his uncle's invitation for the boy to attend – which was *absolutely* nepotism, given that technically Wen Yuan was nothing more than a local high school student and the ward of one of the university's medical researchers who was assisting in the project.

He knew his uncle had extended the offer as a favor, a unique opportunity for the orphan Lan Wangji was mentoring to be involved in an important scientific project. But Wen Yuan was uncommonly sensitive for a sixteen year old boy. And he had a particular attachment to Yiling Laozu.

They had met when Wen Yuan was a silent ten-year-old, newly handed over to his cousins' care and still processing the death of the grandmother who had raised him. He'd stumbled across one of Lan Wangji's papers on the development of meditative practices and belief in Daoist immortals and had reached out with questions. By the time that he had entered high school, he was a regular visitor at the university, and happily spent his summers as Lan Wangji's research assistant. Which, in recent years, had involved delving into the fascinating lore of Yiling Laozu – both the ice man and the folkloric hero – and recording observations of the man himself in an effort to narrow down his time and place of origin.

They had spent hours together with the man in the ice. On some level, Wen Yuan had come to think of Yiling Laozu as a companion in their journey to explore this lost fragment of the past. As Lan Wangji had.

Still. The boy deserved to make his own choices, and when the offer had been presented, he had insisted on attending with Lan Wangji. But Lan Wangji could easily see the conflicted

look in the boy's eyes when they flickered towards the large viewing window looking into the lab where the de-icing procedure would take place.

When Yiling Laozu had been found, he'd been upright in the ice. It had given him an ethereal quality, an illusion of being poised in midair like a Daoist immortal from the sacred gardens of Mount Kunlun, with the long banner of his hair, tied in a high tail but otherwise left loose, flowing in a slow waving arc down the length of his back.

But, of course, the nature of the pose meant that the ice block they'd cut around him was taller than it was wide or thick, and to minimize the risk of it falling, outside of a special display when Yiling Laozu first was brought to the museum, he was always stored and transported with the ice laid flat, effectively on his back.

Still striking. Still ethereal. But somehow much more fragile seeming.

And, lying on the specially designed table meant to carefully wear away the ice, he looked… very alone.

Although Lan Wangji suspected he and Wen Yuan were the only ones to think so. In fact, he had the feeling that when choosing his project team, his uncle had quite deliberately selected team members for their disinclinations towards sentimentality.

Which only made him more determined to be here. It seemed Wen Yuan felt much the same.

The intercom connecting the observation room to the lab turned on. "Everything looks like it's in order," Lan Xichen said. "I'm going to turn the conductor on now."

Lan Wangji turned his attention to the large observation window and the lab, where his brother was carefully adjusting the controls on the heating elements that would be used to remove the last layers of ice while – if the design created by the project team was successful – leaving the body inside untouched. Eventually the thaw would be completed, of course, but everyone had agreed that pausing after the removal of the external ice for closer observation of the intact body first would be preferable.

Which presented the same logistical challenge as when Yiling Laozu was in the glacier: the danger that his body would begin to thaw before the ice melted. They'd tried to compensate by cutting away as much of the ice as possible, leaving only a thin final layer in place, barely a centimeter thick. And they were attempting to remove the remainder using low heat and direct contact with the ice, rather than risking any radiant heat reaching the darker material of the man's clothing.

For several long minutes, nothing happened. Having expected as much, Lan Wangji clasped his wrist behind his back and simply breathed, calm and steady – a habit picked up from his uncle, ironically enough, but one that had stood him in good stead in countless long lines, public transit stations, and intimidating his dissertation committee. Not that the last had been *intentional*, exactly, but apparently long still patience made him… difficult to question.

Wen Yuan, he was amused to note, had picked up the habit as well, although his eyes remained locked on the window, as if by staring intently enough he would be able to *see* the

incremental melting of the ice.

The procedure had been going for about half an hour when unexpectedly, Lan Xichen made a signal, frowning.

“Xichen? What is it?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Maybe nothing,” Lan Xichen replied, after hesitating a moment too long. “I’m just going to take a closer look.”

Everyone in the observation room tensed. This was, after all, the most delicate point. If it wasn’t going to be possible to remove the ice without beginning to thaw Yiling Laozu, they would have to move very quickly to preserve some of the data they wanted. The cellular damage caused by the freezing process meant that once the ice thawed, the damage would spread rapidly.

Lan Wangji glanced at Wen Yuan. “Leave if you need to,” he told the boy quietly.

Wen Yuan shook his head. “No, I want to stay…”

Lan Wangji wasn’t certain what caught his attention – a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye, a hint of sound, a flash of intuition.

He looked up to see Lan Xichen slam into the window. Drop out of sight, stunned by the impact. Beyond, shards of shattered ice fell from black robes scattered across the floor as Yiling Laozu’s body tumbled off the lab table—

Twisted. Landed on his feet. *Stood*.

Piercing silvery-grey eyes flickered across the room, wary and confused.

Lan Wangji froze. Yiling Laozu was awake.

…Yiling Laozu was *alive.*

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: there was a whole fad of mummy romance stories associated with Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt. Interestingly, the stories usually featured an Egyptian princess’s mummy and a modern man falling in love with the idea of who she had been. So I’m just saying, if a (canonically) gorgeous guy perfectly preserved in ice were found? There would be one hell of a fandom springing up *overnight*…

Fair warning, I am playing very fast and loose with both Chinese history and the minimal world building of MDZS here, in order to slot the MDZS setting (which is Fantasy Medieval China the same way most Western fantasy stories are in a Fantasy

Medieval Europe) into something resembling a historical framework. One of the major factors: while I've heard that MXTX has said in interviews that there's an emperor in the MDZS setting… somewhere… in-text there's no mention of an emperor, and I find the existence of one unlikely for one reason: *Wen Ruohan*. Because he wasn't just aiming for influence, he was taking over other sects. He was seizing land. Which means he was going for temporal power.

Does anyone really think he'd tolerate a rival who wasn't even a cultivator?

So I decided to set MDZS late in the 350-year period between the fall of the Han and the rise of the Sui (which interestingly doesn't actually have a single name, although "Age of Disunity" and "the Northern and Southern Dynasties" both show up in English-language histories; the latter seems to be more common). Mostly because that was a period where power really lay with local warlords vying among themselves for power and influence – which fits the structure of the sects nicely. So during the Han, maybe cultivators were the genre-typical politically neutral monster hunting sages… but the sects shifted to being local power centers in the power vacuum after the fall, and now *they're* the ones jockeying for control.

(I have seen some references to a claim that MXTX made in an interview to the effect that MDZS is set in the Qin dynasty. To which I just say, *facepalm*. Look, minor anachronisms like potatoes and chili peppers are one thing, but the society of the sects as we see them literally could not exist in that time period. For example: no private ownership of swords, means that while the sects would probably still have theirs, you definitely wouldn't have rogue cultivators. Also, Jiang Cheng's sword would not be named Sandu, there would be no temple to Guanyin in Yunping, and you completely lose the backstory of the Lan, because there were no monks and no monasteries until Buddhism reached China in the Han dynasty, and it only became genuinely widespread in the age of disunity. Oh, and there's no Lan library, no books to steal forbidden songs from, no talismans, and definitely no paperman escapades, because *paper hasn't been invented yet*. Oi.

Besides, MXTX's author's notes are very explicit about the setting being a fantasy hodgepodge of many different eras, and therefore not set in any era in particular.

Mind, I'm probably a little more offended by that than I normally would be, just because I'm acutely aware of how much handwaving of anachronisms I had to do in this fic to set MDZS in the period just before the rise of the Sui… *seven hundred years later than the Qin*.)

Another part of tweaking the MDZS backstory is that, to minimize the number of random OC's I have to create, I've pretty much lifted any character who isn't utterly pivotal out of the backstory and placed them in the present. However, this is *not* a reincarnation story. This means that characters like Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli are long dead, although they still impact the story in their own way.

Ironically? Lan Wangji was one of the easier characters to edit out of the backstory. Yes, he's an *important* character, and since we're invested in his primary-story role as the second protagonist, MXTX is careful to keep track of him in the backstory… But if you

look at the major decisions Wei Wuxian makes over the course of the backstory, Lan Wangji isn't a factor in any of them. He's important to the narrative arc – and, of course, as the deuteragonist and future love interest. But in terms of actual impact on Wei Wuxian's decisions and experiences? Taking Wen Qing out of the backstory had *vastly* more impact!

Chapter 2: Welcome to the 21st Century

Chapter Summary

In which there is a great furor.

Chapter Notes

I prefer not to go for swearing except when characters are in genuine duress, but for some reason Nie Mingjue's character insisted on being ex-military, with the language to go with it. I try to keep it mild, but cursing is definitely part of his vocabulary, especially when I'm writing his internal character voice.

Dimly, distantly, Lan Wangji was aware of equipment alarms blaring. Someone shouting. The *crack* of a coffee mug dropped at precisely the wrong angle. But the observation room was a bubble of stunned silence, as everyone *froze*.

He would find the wordplay of that amusing, later.

For the moment, Lan Wangji could only stare, as frozen with shock as anyone else.

How? The man should be dead. He'd been frozen – trapped in solid ice – he was *over a thousand years old—*

The door to the lab slammed open.

"*Nobody move! Hands up!*"

A trio of security guards surged into the lab, weapons drawn – someone must have hit a panic button when Lan Xichen had gone flying, or some sort of automatic alarm had been triggered, they'd been on high security already because of the protestors at the university gates—

Yiling Laozu reacted immediately, shifting to put his back to the lab wall, body tense and wary.

The motion drew the eyes of the guard in front, and Lan Wangji saw the moment the man realized what – *who* – he was looking at. Saw the look of utter, blank disbelief, followed by pale shock that turned the guard's face as white as bleached paper—

"I-I said *hands up*! *Get down on the floor*!"

Yiling Laozu simply tilted his head slightly, as if wondering how he was supposed to do both things at the same time.

No, not that – he doesn't understand what they're saying!

Of course he wouldn't, if they were right about the timeframe than the language he spoke was fifteen hundred years old, for all intents and purposes it was a completely different language…

"Tell them to stand down," he managed to force out, although his tongue felt as heavy as lead in his mouth. "Uncle, tell them to *stand down*, he doesn't understand them…"

"Impossible," Lan Qiren was muttering, clearly lost in his own shock and not even noticing Lan Wangji's words. "This is *physically impossible*…!"

"Uncle—!"

"*Stop it!*"

Lan Wangji started, only realizing that the space beside him was empty when a lanky figure darted past the security guards to skid to a stop between them and the impossible figure of Yiling Laozu, arms spread wide.

Wen Yuan!

In his defense, Wen Yuan hadn't *planned* to jump in front of a bunch of twitchy guys holding guns.

Except that his head had been full of a horrible jumble of *he's alive, he's alive, he's alive and they're going to* kill *him…!*, and the security guys had left the door open, and he hadn't known *what* he was going to do beyond *something* but he had to do it!

"Don't get in the way, kid!" the guy in front snapped, and oh great, Wen Yuan actually *recognized* him, this was the same guard who always kept trying to kick him out because high school students didn't belong running around the university, even though no one else cared and he even had official permission to come. "He's dangerous, he attacked Doctor Lan, move!"

"Of course he did!" Wen Yuan snapped back impatiently, not budging. "What would *you* do if you suddenly woke up and you'd been kidnapped by aliens?! That's got to be how he feels right now!"

One of the other guards made a strangled noise, and the third's lips twitched slightly. The guy in the front just spluttered – and spluttering was fine, it was even good, Wen Yuan would take it, especially when spluttering meant the guy had lowered his gun a little bit…

"…*pfft*…"

He blinked and looked over his shoulder. Because Yiling Laozu had just *laughed*. Okay, not laugh-laughing, but he knew a snicker when he heard one, and the man's silvery-grey eyes were… he'd always thought the expression about eyes dancing was a bit of poetic license, but this time Wen Yuan was pretty sure that no other phrase would fit.

Blinking again, Wen Yuan smiled tentatively, and felt his heart squeeze a little when he got an amused grin in return. Because that wasn't *I'm in over my head and don't know what to do*, Wen Yuan knew what that looked like from Mo Xuanyu. That was *this whole situation is unexpectedly hilarious*.

Sputtering became a snarl. "You think this is *funny*, huh?!"

The next second got… confusing.

There was a *pow* sort of noise. Suddenly Wen Yuan wasn't standing where he'd been, because he'd been pushed off to the side and Yiling Laozu was there instead, eyes narrowed and face hard, one arm raised with a closed fist in front of him, watching the security guard like he was *one second* from taking the man down hard, and Wen Yuan had a feeling he could do it…

"*Su Minshan, what the* hell *are you doing?!*"

Everyone in the room flinched – except for Wen Yuan, whose brain was still spinning its wheels trying to catch up with *wait what just happened*, and Yiling Laozu, who was still watching the security guys with narrowed eyes.

The guy in the front – okay, Su Minshan, apparently he had a name – didn't flinch, he *jumped*, staring wide-eyed first at the big man who'd walked into the room, and then at the gun in his hand as if he'd never seen it before.

Then, suddenly, he flung the gun down onto the floor. "It's not my fault! That was a misfire, it went off on its own!"

The big man who Wen Yuan vaguely recognized as the head of university security blanched as the gun hit the floor with a clatter, spinning a bit as it slid across the hard surface to come up with a *clunk* against the base of a cabinet.

Then he turned a glower that probably qualified as a lethal weapon all on its own full-force on Su Minshan. "You two," he gritted, "get this idiot *out* of here, sit him down, and make sure he does *absolutely nothing* until I have time to deal with him."

One of the guards gave a thin-lipped nod, grabbing the protesting Su Minshan by the arm and pushing him not exactly gently towards the door. The other hesitated. "Mister Nie, is that a good idea?" he asked, eyes flickering towards Yiling Laozu, who was watching everything with sharp, intent eyes, still tensed to move if he needed to. "Minshan overreacted, but – that man…"

"Just stepped *in front* of the kid because he thought the situation was dangerous," the big man said dryly. "Which to me is pretty good evidence that he's not hostile. So since the lot of you

have apparently completely forgotten everything you ever learned on how to *not escalate a situation*, scram already so I can handle it."

Off to the side, Lan Xichen coughed slightly as he used the edge of a counter to pull himself back up. Professor Lan Wangji's older brother looked worse for wear, his braid loosened and his lab coat askew – even more disconcerting given how put-together he normally looked. But the gentle, slightly rueful smile as he straightened was just as Wen Yuan had learned to expect.

"It's all right, A'Yao," he said, looking at the hesitating security officer. "Young Wen Yuan was quite right – given the circumstances in which he woke up, his reaction was completely reasonable." He reached down to pick up the clipboard and pen lying on the floor before the puddle from a stray piece of cracked ice could reach it, wincing only a little bit. He rubbed his side, then added, "And to be honest… I think he pulled that kick."

The guard pursed his lips, clearly unhappy, but finally sighed and nodded, stepping through the door and pulling it closed behind him.

The head of security sighed heavily, rubbing his forehead for a moment, before he turned to Wen Yuan and Yiling Laozu, and hesitated. "Gotta admit, I don't know quite *what* to do next…"

Yiling Laozu tilted his head slightly, studying the man. Then, very deliberately, he opened his hand.

All of them stared blankly at the bullet lying on his palm.

Humming to himself, Yiling Laozu tilted his hand this way and that, studying the way it rolled about, testing the heft of it. Then, quite deliberately, he turned his hand over, letting the bullet drop to the floor and bounce on the tile.

Suddenly, Wen Yuan's head was spinning.

That guy shot *that at me. I almost got* shot... Dizzily, he grabbed the edge of the lab table in a desperate bid for balance. And threw up.

Ouch. Don't blame the kid one bit, though. Nie Mingjue knew that wrenching feeling of *I almost died, someone tried to kill me* from personal experience, and *he* was a grown adult who'd signed up for these sorts of messes. He didn't blame the kid for losing his breakfast – and probably last night's dinner, from the way he kept retching, ow – in the least.

Nie Mingjue had *not* signed up for a *thousand-year-old corpse who had decided that he wasn't dead* and could apparently *catch bullets barehanded*.

Granted, also a guy who had immediately caught and steadied the kid without so much as blinking at the mess – Nie Mingjue could practically *hear* the shrieking from the guys in the observation room at the thought of bile splashing on those ancient boots – and even held Wen

Yuan's hair back with a gentleness that suggested he had his own experience with post-combat queasiness.

Actually, he probably did. Nie Mingjue might not remember much from his history classes, but he knew enough about the post-Han world from military classes and Lan Xichen's gushing to know that if their iceman was wearing a sword, he knew how to use it. And likely *had*.

Once the kid had finished retching, Yiling Laozu helped him sit down on the nearest flat raised surface – which ironically was the same lab table they'd been thawing the guy on, stray chunks of ice impatiently brushed aside as he helped the kid lean forward and put his head between his knees.

"*Wen Yuan!*"

It said something about the day he was having that Nie Mingjue actually jumped a little as Lan Wangji rushed past him, moving at that weirdly Lan Not Running pace that meant *get out of the way or face the consequences*. For a moment, Nie Mingjue held his breath, because Yiling Laozu had already been forced to defend the kid once and his tolerance had to be at its limits, especially because there was no way the guy was possibly firing on all cylinders when he'd been *frozen solid* for over a thousand years. But apparently Worried Guardian was a universal that transcended time, because the guy simply looked at Lan Wangji's pale face and tilted his head to indicate the table on the kid's other side, his hand still rubbing soothing circles on Wen Yuan's back. Lan Wangji immediately sat, leaning in to speak to Wen Yuan quietly but intently.

Nie Mingjue allowed himself a silent sigh of relief, and took advantage of the quiet moment to step to the side and pick up Su Minshan's discarded firearm.

And promptly started swearing, vociferously enough that Lan Xichen and Wen Yuan both looked shocked, Lan Wangji actually frowned at him, and even the guy from fifteen hundred years ago looked bemused, probably because *really pissed off* did not require understanding the exact words to communicate.

Because who the *hell* dropped a gun *with the safety disengaged*?! They were *so* damned lucky the thing hadn't gone off, because if it had, someone would be bleeding. With all the hard surfaces in here, ricochet wasn't a possibility, it was *inevitable*.

That was it, the guy was *out*. Nie Mingjue could understand freaking out under the circumstances – because really, there had to be a half-dozen horror movies that started out this way. But the guy hadn't just freaked out, he'd *escalated*, screwed up and fired his gun straight at a teenage kid who didn't do more than talk, and *then* tried to weasel out of responsibility when he'd *damned well* pulled that trigger with intent. Nie Mingjue was going to throw Su Minshan straight out of the university gates and all the way down the mountain!

Ah, hells. Given this mess, firing the guy's going to be complicated. There isn't an NDA in the world *that's going to keep his mouth shut, not about this.*

Ah well. At least that would give him a chance to try and figure out who had issued the guy *live ammunition*. The fact that they had firearms at *all* was a reflection of just how much international attention and prestige was tied up in the Yiling Laozu project, the last thing they needed was some idiot protester out to protect her precious *husbando* getting shot dead. Everyone *should* have been issued safety bullets, not the real thing, dammit!

Taking a moment to calm himself, Nie Mingjue very carefully clicked the safety back into place – acutely aware that Yiling Laozu was watching him intently from the corner of his eye, which just meant the guy was not stupid – and then went back to the door.

Opening it, he frowned. "I told you to leave."

Meng Yao shrugged slightly. "Minshan's not going to raise a fuss until it sinks in that *it wasn't my fault* is not going to get him out of trouble. Zonghui can sit on him until then. Are you sure you want me to leave? I mean, his reaction was reasonable, but that guy…"

"…is probably calmer than anyone else in the whole building right now," Nie Mingjue told him dryly. He handed the firearm over to Meng Yao. "Get that stored as evidence, then either go help sit on Minshan or go to the office and start writing up an incident report for me. Pretty sure we got the whole thing on camera, but I want your take on this."

Meng Yao pursed his lips, still looking reluctant, but he did finally accept the gun and walk away.

Nie Mingjue stepped back inside and closed the door. Irony was, Yiling Laozu *was* probably the calmest person in the room and likely the building right now. If only because he didn't know just *how* impossible the circumstances were.

Can't say I envy him the moment when it all sinks in, Nie Mingjue admitted to himself. *Glad I'm not going to be the one having that conversation. "Hi, have to tell you that you've been frozen for over a thousand years, hope you didn't have anyone waiting for you, you really should be dead…"*

Huh. Given the level of chaos, and… well, everything…

Grabbing the intercom to the connecting room, Nie Mingjue pitched his voice to the clear, commanding tone he'd been trained in to cut through the confusion of a battlefield and said, "If she's not already on her way, someone fill Doctor Wen in on what's going on and tell her to get over here. She has three patients to check on."

And, huh. Yiling Laozu had twitched just a little bit, eyes darting from Nie Mingjue to the glass window connecting the rooms and back again. Had he heard the intercom on the other side? Not exactly impossible, the window wasn't designed to be completely soundproof, but still. That was good hearing. *Sensitive* hearing.

"Three?" Lan Xichen asked quietly. "Surely that's not…"

Nie Mingjue cut him off with a pointed scowl. "You got kicked hard enough to *go flying*," he said dryly. "Yeah, the guy probably pulled it, but you're still getting checked out."

And maybe bringing Wen Qing in would help calm things down a bit more, because Yiling Laozu was putting on a good face but under the iron calm he *had* to be freaking out. Bare minimum, the fluorescent lights in here *buzzed*. Nie Mingjue was used to it, but it wasn't hard to imagine how nerve-grating that would be if you didn't even know *what* was making the sounds…

Who am I kidding. Forget the buzz, he wouldn't know what electric lights *are.* Yeah, the kid had definitely been onto something with the whole "abducted by aliens" analogy.

Speaking of whom, Wen Yuan finally drew in a breath that only shuddered a little and straightened, still looking distinctly green around the edges and wild-eyed. But he managed to muster a slightly shaky smile for his mentor. Then he turned to Yiling Laozu, who'd drawn back a bit to give the two space and keep an eye on his surroundings, and to Nie Mingjue's surprise, gave a pretty good formal bow despite the odd position. "Thank you," he said.

Yiling Laozu blinked for a moment, then laughed, waving a hand carelessly as he said… something.

It… *sounded* like it should be familiar. Honestly, it reminded Nie Mingjue of the time he'd spent a couple weeks in Hong Kong, back before he'd retired from military service. The writing had been fine and familiar – mostly, there'd been some interesting double-takes along the way – and part of him had felt like he *should* have understood what people were saying.

Yeah, not so much. He'd mostly gotten by using the English that he'd been forced to study in school and then brushed up on in officer's training.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly, eyes narrowing. Said… *something*, pronouncing each set of sounds slowly and cautiously.

Yiling Laozu blinked, looking taken aback. Tilted his head one way, then the other. Frowned slightly, and said something in response, much slower this time.

Lan Wangji listened with the intent focus that Nie Mingjue usually associated with lining up a tricky shot, Lan Xichen leaning over a staff chart, or Meng Yao setting forth to do battle against red tape. Then the man turned to look at Lan Xichen. "Brother." He tilted his head to indicate the clipboard in Lan Xichen's hand. "May I?"

"Eh? Oh. Of course." Still looking bemused, Lan Xichen handed over the clipboard, and then plucked a spare mechanical pencil out of the breast pocket of his lab coat – presumably the one he'd been using to keep notes on the thawing process had gone flying at the same time he had – and handed that over as well. "But do you really think…"

Lan Xichen let the words trail off with a wry smile, since it was obvious that Lan Wangji wasn't listening. He'd flipped one of the sheets over and was carefully writing. Writing using the traditional characters, not the modern simplified version.

Nie Mingjue almost laughed when Yiling Laozu shamelessly leaned forward to look over the man's elbow at the clipboard.

Immediately, his face brightened, and he opened his mouth as if to say something before huffing, clearly realizing that wasn't going to work. And then did a double-take, shooting Lan Wangji an almost comic dirty look.

No almost, that's absolutely comedic. Deliberately so. "What are you writing?"

"A line from the *Shi-jing*," Lan Wangji replied shortly.

Poetry. *Gah*. Why. Nie Mingjue had suffered through that in school, and that had been enough. He kept up with it enough to give semi-intelligible feedback when his brother was in one of his, "*But Dage*..." moods, and that was about it. His brain hurt to imagine an era when your mastery of the stuff dictated whether you were considered fit for military service…

Oh. Huh. Given that there *had* been a time when pretty much any noble, educated man would be expected to at least attempt to master the four classics… Yiling Laozu had a sword. Odds were good that he also had an *education*.

Which meant that his pout at the poetry had to be at least half a deflection, or at least a stalling tactic. *You want to make me admit to being educated? How could you!*

And in fact, the pout vanished as Lan Wangji finished writing and offered the pencil to the man. Yiling Laozu plucked it gingerly from Lan Wangji's fingers, frowning as he turned it over in his hands and held it up to look more closely, as if he'd never seen…

Right. Mechanical pencil. The guy *hadn't* seen anything like it before. Oops.

The guy handled the paper the same way. He ran quick fingers over the surface of it as his eyebrows rose. Flicked the paper lightly as if inspecting the weight. Turned one corner over, eyebrows going even higher before furrowing for a moment as he scanned the printed characters on the other side. Finally, however, he let the pages fall flat again, going back to the blank side Lan Wangji had been using. And held the pencil over the paper, although his grip was *odd*, the pencil vertical…

Brush, idiot. He's used to writing with a brush and ink.

Except… the guy apparently realized the problem immediately. He hesitated, frowning slightly as his eyes flickered over to Lan Wangji's hands. Then he adjusted his grip to what had to be an approximation of how Lan Wangji had held it, and rather than attempting immediately to write, claimed a corner of the paper to lay down a series of quick, light lines, clearly getting a feel for how the implement worked.

After a moment, he grinned and turned the clipboard to face them.

Wen Yuan made an undignified squeak, and to Nie Mingjue's intense amusement, Lan Wangji's ears reddened slightly. Understandably; that was a *very* good likeness of the two of them, Wen Yuan looking very stern and brave with Lan Wangji behind him looking on with dignified pride.

The corresponding sketch of two bunnies in the *exact same* poses and expressions was just hilariously adorable.

Yiling Laozu laughed – obviously he'd gotten exactly the reaction he'd aimed for. Then, spinning the pencil neatly in his fingers, he turned the clipboard back, tapped the back end lightly against his cheek for a moment in apparent thought, and began to write.

Behind Nie Mingjue, he heard the beeping of someone entering the code into the door's lock, and the heavy *chunk* of the bolt disengaging.

And now he was grateful for an entirely new reason that they'd installed some damn heavy security on the place. The initial thought had been to keep more aggressive or violent protestors from getting in to disrupt the procedure, but given *this*…

The door opened. "Nie Mingjue, you had better have an explanation for what's going on," Wen Qing said briskly. "Because I've heard three different stories and they're all crazy…"

A beat of silence.

"Well. Apparently not so crazy," the doctor corrected herself, tone utterly flat.

Nie Mingjue smirked without turning around. He liked Wen Qing. Butted heads with her on a regular basis, yes, but he was a macho military guy and owned it, he respected a lady who didn't let him intimidate her and wasn't afraid to intimidate him right back. "No, it's impossible all right. It just happens to also be *true*."

Wen Qing sighed heavily. "Fine," she said tartly, stepping forward. "Who am I treating, and what for?"

And there was the other reason he liked her: she didn't waste time. Very handy when his guys had to break up a campus brawl that led to worse than a few bloody noses. "Lan Xichen, blunt impact."

"I'm really quite fine," Lan Xichen interrupted.

Nie Mingjue gave his friend a *look*. "The guy *kicked* you—"

"Which he was justified in doing," Lan Xichen said briskly. And winced when he tried to straighten indignantly.

"Damn straight he was," Nie Mingjue snorted. Anyone waking up to a situation as insane as this one got some leeway on twitchy reactions – and there was also the fact that none of them knew what had happened to *get* the guy stuck in ice. Odds were good that whatever he remembered most recently prior to waking up wasn't anything pleasant. "Doesn't change the fact that he sent you flying into the *wall*."

The scary part was, Nie Mingjue was very sure that Yiling Laozu *had* pulled that kick. Anyone who could pull off what he had done could put enough force into a kick to make it potentially *lethal*. And, again, sword, and acted like he knew combat shakes. Even odds the guy had seen real combat, of the extremely up close and personal variety.

On the other hand, he'd woken up in a strange place, disoriented and confused, had been yelled at and threatened by people speaking a language he didn't understand, and his basic response had been to defend himself, defend the kid, and mostly keep a curious attitude. And a mischievous sense of humor, going by the grin on his face as he spun the pencil in his fingers again, watching Lan Wangji frown at the clipboard that was back in his hands while also keeping an oh-so-casual eye on Nie Mingjue and the door. Which, given the way things had gone in the past ten minutes since the man had woken up to a completely alien environment, was also completely justified in Nie Mingjue's opinion.

Wen Qing, meanwhile, had leveled a quelling look at Lan Xichen. "You're getting checked," she said, in a voice that brooked no objections. "The other patients?"

"Shock. Wen Yuan," Nie Mingjue said. "Kid got shot at. Don't think he actually got hurt, but…"

Wen Qing's lips pressed together, eyes blazing furiously for a moment before the expression was shoved under professional neutrality by iron will. Nie Mingjue wasn't completely clear on the kid's story, but he knew that Wen Qing and her brother were his legal guardians, despite technically being cousins of some variety. He definitely knew Wen Qing had pulled some strings to get the kid his introduction to Lan Wangji.

"And I can guess the third," she said, tugging the strap of the heavy-duty first aid kit she'd brought with her more securely over her shoulder and stepping forward.

And immediately stopped, eyeing the large observation window. "Lan Xichen. Please close that. This is a matter of medical confidentiality at the moment."

Lan Xichen gaped at her, obviously scrambling to process that statement. "Close it? But…"

Huffing, Wen Qing stalked over to the controls by the window and pressed the button to lower the privacy screen over the glass. And, ignoring Lan Xichen, picked up the intercom controls. "I am well aware there are cameras installed in this room. In the unlikely event that something happens to justify violating patient privacy, you can use those. I am *not* doing an exam on someone I can't even talk to with any more of a peanut gallery than strictly necessary," she said curtly, before she briskly set the intercom down and silenced it.

Probably a wise choice. Nie Mingjue could just *imagine* Lan Qiren's reaction to having his project so completely disrupted and now being locked out of observation – or rather, he knew that what he could imagine probably paled in comparison to the man's actual reaction.

On the other hand, Wen Qing definitely had a point. He hadn't even realized how tense Yiling Laozu still was until the glass window with its vague shapes beyond the bright lights was covered over.

Lan Xichen was looking blankly back and forth between Wen Qing, Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue, apparently trying to decide if he should object to Wen Qing's high-handed commandeering of the situation. After a moment, however, he sighed ruefully and sank down onto one of the lab chairs, offering the woman a sheepish smile.

There were limits to what Wen Qing could do in this sort of setting, of course. But she did first check Lan Xichen for a concussion, and then put him through a series of basic mobility checks, frowning at the way he winced when bending or twisting.

“He didn’t really kick me, exactly,” Lan Xichen said, sounding oddly apologetic – on Yiling Laozu’s behalf or his own, Nie Mingjue couldn’t tell. “It was… I was actually leaning right over him when his eyes opened. He was still mostly caught in the ice, but he got his leg up and… well, mostly he just shoved me away.”

“Shoved you hard enough you flew into the wall,” Nie Mingjue interjected, because that was still an important qualification. Although he supposed Lan Xichen had a point about the difference between the plant-and-push of a shove and the snap-impact of a kick. Given that it could also mean the difference between a nasty bruise and a *ruptured spleen*.

Wen Qing pursed her lips. “I expect you to go to the clinic for a proper exam later. I’ll make sure they know to expect you.”

Translation: he *would* show up there later, and if he didn’t she would know that he hadn’t and expect to know *why*. Which made sense, since a proper examination would require Lan Xichen taking his shirt and coat off so that they could actually *see* the bruise. Nie Mingjue had half-expected her to demand Lan Xichen to disrobe on the spot, but apparently she considered these circumstances too public, even with the observation window blocked.

Lan Xichen being who he was, of course, he *would* be at the clinic, right on schedule. And Wen Qing was clearly aware of that, because after pinning him with a *look*, she turned briskly away. “A’Yuan. You next.”

Honestly, at this point the kid could probably do without; the color had more or less returned to his face, and his eyes were clear. He could still stand to have something warm to drink and something light to replenish the meal he’d lost – and they’d need to pull out the biohazard kit and clean that mess up – but the worst of the shock seemed to have passed.

Except that Wen Qing also needed to check on Yiling Laozu. The man *acted* as if he’d simply gotten up from a nap, but Nie Mingjue knew a few things about faking it in precarious situations. Hard to beat waking up in an alien environment surrounded by people you couldn’t even talk to for a *precarious situation*.

Which was why Wen Qing was insisting on checking Wen Yuan, he was willing to bet. Give the guy a chance to see what they were doing *before* she tried to give an exam to someone she couldn’t explain anything to.

Wen Yuan apparently got that, too. He started to open his mouth as if to object, only to hesitate, glancing towards Yiling Laozu.

And did a double take.

Yiling Laozu blinked at them innocently before neatly removing a spring from its moorings and holding it up between his fingers, lightly flexing it to watch it bend. The recoil was clearly stronger than he’d expected; the spring slipped from his grip and went flying, only for

him to neatly pluck it from the air with his other hand. Laughing, the man set it down beside the other pieces arranged neatly on the table next to him and looked back at Wen Yuan, eyebrows raised.

Nie Mingjue had taken apart any number of mechanical pencils and pens during the many meetings that had plagued his career. He was professionally impressed.

Moreso because the man continued playing with the pencil as Wen Qing started a very basic baseline exam on Wen Yuan, paying close attention to the process despite the apparent distraction. Nie Mingjue caught a flicker of surprise when Wen Qing let go of Wen Yuan's wrist after a preliminary pulse check, and Yiling Laozu tilted his head and looked puzzled when she went to listen to the boy's breathing. And all the while, long and agile fingers took the mechanical pencil down to its component parts, trailed over the precisely machined threading, flicked curiously against steel and plastic, and delicately traced the thin, fragile lead cores.

Finally, Wen Qing stepped back, nodded briskly at Wen Yuan. And turned to Lan Wangji. "You can communicate with him?" she asked, nodding to Yiling Laozu.

Lan Wangji hesitated. "Within strict limits," he said, picking up the clipboard. And hesitated.

Yiling Laozu looked at him, then, sheepishly, at the dismantled pencil. Then, grinning, he picked the core up again.

Nie Mingjue felt his eyebrows go up as pieces clicked back into place, each one plucked up in the correct order with easy, quick certainty. The spring slid back over its base, the body spun back onto the threads that held it to the finger grip – and Yiling Laozu spun the reconstructed pencil lightly between his fingers, flipped it over, and offered the grip back to Lan Wangji.

All of that, despite the fact that the man would never have even *seen* anything like it before, and half the technology used to keep the pencil together – like those screw threads – would have been wholly unfamiliar to him.

That is a very *smart man*.

Lan Wangji's expression didn't shift at all as he accepted the pencil; Nie Mingjue envied the guy's poker face. "What do you wish to know?"

"My patient's name," Wen Qing replied.

Nie Mingjue opened his mouth. Closed it.

Oh. Right. Yiling Laozu was *their* name for the guy, a label they'd slapped onto a human-shaped ice cube. It wasn't *his name*.

Lan Xichen looked as stunned as Nie Mingjue felt. Lan Wangji simply nodded, frowning slightly in concentration before writing a single character.

Yiling Laozu – the man blinked, then chuckled, saying something accompanied by pointedly raised eyebrows at Lan Wangji.

Apparently that meant something to the man, because he inclined his head slightly. “Lan Wangji,” he said, and quickly, although still neatly, wrote the characters of his name.

Yiling Laozu tilted his head to read the characters, brow furrowed as he mouthed the name with apparent confusion. After a moment, he shrugged slightly and turned an expectant look on Wen Yuan.

The kid actually brightened. “I’m Wen Yuan!” he said, quickly taking the board and pencil when Lan Wangji passed them to him and writing it down. Yiling Laozu’s eyebrows rose slightly when he looked at it, but he nodded thoughtfully.

Then the man accepted the board and pencil in turn, carefully correcting his grip on the pencil before writing three characters and then turning the board to face them with a bright smile.

“Wei Wuxian,” he said.

NOTES:

(Yep, went over the limit. By about two sentences! So close!)

Could a cultivator actually catch a bullet barehanded? Eh. Probably not, and certainly not an MDZS cultivator, since that is – to use the RPG term – a relatively Low Magic setting. I’m justifying Wei Wuxian getting away with it here because, first, there was only one threat in the room and that threat was in plain view, which meant he was *focused*. And second, he could tell he was being threatened but he didn’t know what the weapon was, so he was on high alert. And also because it was one of the founding images for the fic, and Rule of Cool won out!

A note on Nie Mingjue: novel canon, he is not a particularly *good* person. He’s as rigid as Lan Qiren, vindictive, and hypocritical. But I’m generally more open to positive depictions of his character than I am with similar characters, simply because we only ever see him in canon when he has the equivalent of a malevolent prefrontal brain tumor – in other words, we *know* he’s suffering something that causes loss of temper, paranoia, and obsessive behavior. There are hints scattered throughout his flashback that he actually wasn’t so extreme initially – the fact that Nie Huaisang *could* be the person he is, his original decision to take Meng Yao under his wing, emphasizing to his men to not hurt civilians. (Not to mention the fact that the Wen Remnants were not originally prisoners of war; they were living free in a small settlement prior to Jin Zixun deciding to pull a Wen Chao. So obviously Nie Mingjue was at least originally willing to leave them alone, or at least be persuaded to do so.)

Plus, bluntly, I needed a security chief character, and since this is a full AU in which the *setting* is effectively one giant Original Character, I want to use canon characters as much as

possible. (As opposed to casefic stories, where you're writing in the original setting and thus all canon characters already have established roles.)

On a related note, I confess that usually it irks me a bit when AUs cast Wen Yuan as Lan Wangji's son, cutting Wei Wuxian and the Wens out of his backstory (generally for the sake of Wei Wuxian falling in love with Good Single Dad Lan Wangji). But since any character in this story *could not* be part of Wei Wuxian's backstory (due to the timeskip going from thirteen years to fifteen *hundred*), the only way to have Wen Yuan be involved at all was to give him ties with Lan Wangji. And the plotbunnies were *very clear* about the waking up in the lab scene!

Speaking of, I'm pretty sure Nie Zonghui is a CQL character? Or at least I don't remember him from the novel. But I needed an extra security guy, so… yoink!

And yes, Middle Chinese was, for all intents and purposes, a completely different language from modern Mandarin. Using an English example for a sense of scale, *Beowulf* was originally written in the 700s CE, which is roughly the same time period I'm using as Wei Wuxian's era of origin. And, contrary to what most movie linguists would have you think (yes, I'm looking at you, Stargate…), language reconstruction is never going to get you a version of a language that would be actually *intelligible* to someone of that time period. There are too many things based on guesses and missing evidence. We might be close in places, but there's always going to be an implicit question mark over any reconstructed ancient language. To make matters worse, the sources we depend on for the reconstruction of ancient languages tend to be written documents. Now, that still works – yes, even for Chinese, mostly because they had rhyming dictionaries for poets to use! – but it's important to remember that the written language was *Classical* Chinese, which would have been an older language predating Middle Chinese…

The *Shi-jing* is sometimes translated as the Book/Classic of Songs/Odes. It's a collection of poetry from the Zhou dynasty and listed by Kongzi (Confucius) as one of the four great classic texts… which, yes, means that anyone who calls themselves educated would be able to recite significant portions of it from memory, and conversation would be full of allusions and side-references. Which, canonically, is the case with Wei Wuxian. He's highly educated and very, very good at shifting formality registers; he'd have the classics mastered *cold*.

And as an interesting aside: based on some reading I've done, the interpretation of the poems of the *Shi-jing* were standardized and canonized fairly early on. Which means that, yes, if you have to use the poems as a means of communication, you at least have a commonly accepted interpretation to fall back on, which in turn would minimize chances of saying one thing while your counterpart hears something else.

(To be honest, my original plotbunny for this story involved Lan Wangji using his mastery of poetry as a means to communicate… except that I have zero knowledge of classical Chinese poetry beyond knowing that there is knowledge to be had!)

I also have no idea if there's a Chinese pop-culture equivalent to *husbando*, but I couldn't come up with anything else that conveyed the proper degree of frustrated exasperation…

Chapter 3: Opening Conversations

Chapter Summary

In which people attempt to adjust. With varying levels of success.

Chapter Notes

Warning for a relatively clinical consideration of sanitary facilities and a touch of toilet-adjacent humor. Lack of bathroom access is one of those things that count as abuse or even *outright torture*, so yes, it's a serious thing to think about. But also awkward and uncomfortable, thus the humor.

"As near as I can determine, he's in good health," Wen Qing said briskly. "Possibly a little chilled, but that's hardly surprising." Given that there still had been *ice* clinging to the hems of Wei Wuxian's robes and even to that long banner of hair.

She would have liked to offer him a change of clothes. The bio research building was not exactly kept warm, the temperature controls were centrally determined and not adjustable, and having the man catch a chill from damp clothes after surviving *freezing solid* was just the sort of contradictory irony that she'd learned to expect in medicine. The problem was, there hadn't been spare clothing available, beyond a few flimsy lab coats that were not sized for someone that tall.

We'll probably have to ask Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue to raid their closets for spares until we can get him some actual clothes of his own beyond those robes.

Plus, she had no intentions of asking the man to disrobe in front of cameras, especially considering that he didn't even know such things *existed*.

Hm. Glancing at her computer, she quickly tapped in a note to ask Lan Wangji about historic privacy and nudity taboos. Given that most of her knowledge came from the occasional xianxia series she and A'Ning watched, it would be a good idea to consult with the closest thing they had to a cultural expert before she had to ask Wei Wuxian to take his shirt off.

Across the table, Lan Qiren's fingers drummed once against the table of the small conference room they'd commandeered for this emergency meeting. "It will take some time to arrange proper testing," he said, lips pursed. "The equipment we have is not suitable given these new… circumstances. Still, with what we have we should be able to conduct preliminary tests."

Across the table, Lan Wangji shifted, obviously unhappy but unwilling to speak out too strongly. Probably wise; from what she'd heard from Wen Yuan's stories, the tense relationship between Lan Wangji and his uncle tended to turn any disagreement between them into a case of immovable objects and unstoppable forces, the merits of either position be damned. Sitting next to his brother, Lan Xichen was glancing back and forth between the two, clearly aware of the tension and equally clearly uncertain what to do about it.

Nie Mingjue met her eyes and shrugged slightly; he knew he didn't have the academic credentials to challenge Lan Qiren's insistence on trying to proceed as if nothing had really changed.

That was fine. She did.

"We need to sort out the personnel situation before we worry about equipment," she said. "First and foremost: anyone in contact with Wei Wuxian must agree to stay in quarantine for the duration."

Predictably, Lan Qiren bristled. "Doctor Wen, *I* am head of the Yiling Laozu project," he snapped.

Doctor, not Miss. That was one good thing about working with Lan Qiren. The man was as stiff as a pillar of ice and about as warm, but as far as he cared, she was a credentialed professional. He didn't object to her because she was a woman, he just objected because she wasn't *Lan Qiren*.

Too bad. "Yes. *Doctor*. Which means, Director Lan, that I am the one responsible for dictating safety measures for the project as necessary."

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, which didn't quite hide the seething. Because she *did* have that authority, and they both knew it. "I do not think the remote chance of some medieval flu…"

"It's not the *researchers* I'm worried for," she interrupted dryly.

Lan Qiren actually spluttered.

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand," Lan Xichen said, stepping in as his uncle fumed. "You just said he was healthy."

"He's *alive*," she said dryly. "He's not malnourished, dehydrated, or hypothermic."

Which made no sense. He'd been frozen. But Wen Qing was a doctor and a scientist. If your data wasn't what you expected, you didn't just ignore it and pretend all was normal.

"As far as physical fitness goes, he could probably qualify for the Olympics sight-unseen," she added. Then she paused, deliberate and pointed. "And his immune system is approximately one thousand five hundred years out of date." She didn't cross her arms, simply rested her hands on the table as she looked at Lan Xichen, then turned her gaze to meet Lan Qiren's eyes steadily. "Anyone who wants to be in a room with Wei Wuxian will be

required to undergo an initial quarantine and maintain it for the duration of their contact until he is vaccinated. This is non-optional."

Thank goodness A'Ning was used to procedures like this; it wasn't common, but it did come up on occasion in her work both as a doctor and a medical researcher. Her little brother was already expecting her to all but live in the labs for a month or two during the initial phases of the Yiling Laozu project, especially if anything went wrong.

Not that "wrong" was quite how she would frame "*our research subject turned out to not be dead*," but it was an unanticipated outcome that was going to take a great deal of her time. Luckily, she and A'Ning had already gone over the NDA she'd signed; he wouldn't worry if she sent him a very vague note explaining that he'd have the apartment to himself for a while.

Well, no. He'd worry. A'Ning always worried. But he'd mostly be worrying about whether or not she'd remember to eat and sleep properly.

Lan Xichen blinked. "Doctor Wen, are you truly suggesting we ask the entire Yiling Laozu project to be quarantined? Surely that's a little unreasonable."

"I'm not *suggesting*," Wen Qing told him, very deliberately not snapping. She understood what he was trying to do – act as a very necessary peacemaker at a table full of stubborn personalities. It was a thankless job. However. "I am telling you that as the medical authority here, those are the *requirements* for anyone who wants to interact directly with Wei Wuxian."

"*Ridiculous!*" Lan Qiren exploded, face red as volcanic lava. "You're making us entirely upend our research schedule for fear of a few sniffles!"

Your schedule is already so much scrap, you old pedant, you just don't want to accept it.

"Would you like me to quote the mortality rate of the common cold for people with compromised immune systems or no previous exposure?" she asked. Maybe a little more tartly than was wise, but Lan Qiren was an archaeologist and a historian, he *knew* this. "Diseases and immunity are a perpetual arms race. Wei Wuxian probably has some baseline resistance to the common diseases of his time, and that's going to do him no good against the modern versions. To say nothing of anything from the Americas, or the diseases that only originated after he froze. So *yes*. I am, in fact, worried about *a few sniffles*."

"Yiling Laozu survived being *frozen* and you worry about *that*?!"

Well. At least the man had admitted to the presence of the elephant in the room, even if he was still refusing to look it in the eye.

"I have no idea how he survived," she said flatly. "There is no medical explanation I can think of. Which means I have no idea if his miraculous survival translates to an equally miraculous immune system. Which means that the principle of *do no harm* requires me to assume that it does *not*, and therefore I am taking no chances until I can conduct the proper tests, and preferably administer the most critical vaccines."

Here she paused, because this was the *real* elephant in the room, and she wasn't certain Lan Qiren or Lan Xichen had even realized it was there. Whether that was due to being overwhelmed, denial, or deliberately ignoring the implications, however… She didn't know.

So she would simply spell it out. "And I'm not doing any of that to a man who cannot understand anything I'm saying and thus cannot give *informed consent* in anything resembling an ethically acceptable manner."

She was a researcher, yes, but first and foremost she was a *doctor*. She'd sworn *oaths*, dammit.

Besides. Ethics aside, she'd be an idiot to try taking a blood sample from a man whose medical knowledge came from somewhere circa 500 CE. The wall already had one human-sized dent in it; that was more than enough. For that matter, given all the other impossibilities that had decided to become not so impossible today, it was entirely possible that there were damn good *reasons* for him to be wary of letting someone take his blood.

It was enough to make the doctor in her want to scream with vexation. On two counts, really. The medical researcher because there was *so much* potential knowledge dangling just beyond her grasp. Wei Wuxian's survival. The reflexes that had let him *catch a bullet barehanded* – not to mention the fact that he hadn't torn his hand apart in the attempt as physics *should have* dictated.

Hell. If she was going to be purely mercenary, there were any number of women who would cheerfully commit bank robbery and possibly murder to get their hands on the secret of that lovely long hair.

Meanwhile, the physician side of her was screaming in frustration for an entirely different reason. Wei Wuxian was, for all intents and purposes, her patient. How was she supposed to treat him when she couldn't even check if he had any allergies?

For all I know, he's lactose intolerant!

Which didn't even get into the problem of where the man could *stay*. For now, he was still in the lab where they'd thawed him, with Wen Yuan keeping him company. But that was no living space, and there *weren't* actual living spaces in the building. And they couldn't exactly give him a dorm room or put him up in a hotel!

Focus. That's a problem for later. Get through this, first.

Lan Qiren swung a furious hand in Lan Wangji's direction. "Then have him explain!"

"Not possible," Lan Wangji said, joining the conversation for the first time.

"Why not?" Lan Xichen asked, in a calmly curious tone that would have been far more convincing if not for how hastily he'd jumped to answer as Lan Qiren's red-faced fury deepened to almost purple. "You speak the language…"

“I do not,” Lan Wangji corrected, still level and uncompromising but slightly less clipped than before. “I can decipher written documents and extrapolate pronunciation based on linguistic recreation, but our knowledge comes from written sources. The classical written language reflected language as it was spoken hundreds of years before his time. Vernacular grammar, vocabulary and pronunciations were already significantly changed. And the most careful reconstruction of even the classical language remains only educated approximation.”

Lan Qiren snorted. “Less *educated* and more *approximate*, apparently,” he huffed.

“But you did communicate with him…” Lan Xichen said, this time sounding honestly confused.

“In a limited manner. Single words, using terms that have not greatly shifted in meaning, clarified by context.” Lan Wangji looked down at the piece of paper in front of him, portraits and bunnies and all. “A shared reference is key. The Confucian interpretations of the *Shi Jing* were set in the Han period. He is educated. He knows them. That allows for some more complicated concepts…”

“But I kind of doubt *vaccine* is anywhere in there,” Nie Mingjue said wryly. “Might get *plague* or *worry about disease*, but that’s not going to get you to *needles squirting stuff into you good*. Or MRI, for that matter.”

Hm. Careful not to take her attention from the discussion, Wen Qing tapped a note into her computer. Injections would be a hard sell, yes, but there were other ways to administer inoculations. Ancient medicine wasn’t really her area of study, but she vaguely recalled from a medical trivia game during pre-med that some of them were much older than you’d think. Possibly old *enough*.

Of course, even if they had existed in his time, that didn’t automatically mean Wei Wuxian would know about them. The dissemination of information would have been so much slower and patchier with the only printing being carved blocks and hand-copies – even more so in an era with no central authority to collect, protect, and most importantly *train people* using the texts in question. But if she could track down where those references came from, that might give Lan Wangji the necessary vocabulary to at least start with.

Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue’s dry joke had apparently succeeded in its purpose. For a moment Lan Qiren had looked like he was going to shout again, but instead he closed his eyes, still visibly fuming, and drew in a long, deliberate breath through his nose. Held it.

Let it go in an aggravated huff. “Reasonable,” he gritted, as if the word physically pained him. For that matter, admitting that *anything* in the whole situation was reasonable probably *did*. “How long will it take before you can proceed with your tests, Doctor Wen?”

Wen Qing traded a quick glance at Lan Wangji, just a flicker of eyes meeting. “I don’t know,” she said bluntly. “There’s not exactly much precedent for this situation. However, given the circumstances, I would suggest we assume two months as a minimum.”

Technically, they could probably start sooner. But no matter how brilliant Wei Wuxian was – and the answer was obviously *very* – language acquisition in any meaningful form took time,

even with total immersion. Even more so with no real shared language to serve as a touchstone in case of confusion. And she was not going to conduct *any* testing beyond the bare minimum required for safety until she was able to hold an actual conversation with the man.

"Two…" Another deep breath as Lan Qiren stroked his beard. "…Very well. Wangji, I expect you to begin work on this *immediately*. I will inform the rest of the project team."

Wen Qing looked down at her notes and allowed herself a deep breath of her own. She still wasn't confident that Lan Qiren had actually heard what she'd been trying to say, but she also knew that there was a limit to how much they could push right now.

Hopefully it would be enough. Lan Qiren could be inflexible, but he had equally rigid moral standards. Surely, once the shock passed, he would recognize that the entire research plan would have to be completely reconsidered in light of this.

Hopefully. But she intended to keep a very close eye on how this developed.

"Something else you'd better think about as well," Nie Mingjue said grimly. "And that's how you're going to present this to the public."

Lan Qiren frowned, although at least he had lost the volcanic edge. "We have no results yet."

"Pretty sure *he's alive* is one *hell* of a result already," Nie Mingjue countered. "More to the point, you know perfectly well that it's going to set off a firestorm when it gets out, Professor – which means you need to get ahead of the situation *now*, before someone leaks it."

The frown deepened. "Everyone in the project team has signed a non-disclosure agreement."

"So did Su Minshan," Nie Mingjue retorted. "And he might even abide by it; courage isn't his strongest trait. But *spite* definitely is, and the only reason he's not out on his ear yet is because *someone* gave him live ammunition *and I intend to know who*."

"Security personnel issues are *your* concern, Officer," Lan Qiren countered crisply. And then, uncharacteristically, allowed himself to slump slightly. "But your point is taken. We will eventually need to explain the situation to our donors."

"And the public," Nie Mingjue pressed. "Like it or not, Professor, this is a project that's drawn international attention. You won't be able to keep the politics – or the press – in the dark forever. He paused. "And if you think that crowd at the front gates is bad *now*…"

Lan Qiren snorted his disdain for public opinion daring to interfere with his Science. "That is *also* your concern," he countered, with the disinterest of a man who lived on the extensive grounds of the university and thus did not have to make his way past the protestors on a regular basis. "Regardless, those are concerns for later."

Wen Qing carefully did not raise an eyebrow. Because maybe Lan Qiren thought he could maintain iron control over his research team – for that matter, it was entirely possible that he

could; he had a reputation as a manager who tolerated no trouble, and in the hardheaded and prideful world of upper academia that was no small thing.

But while he was being patient with them for now, it was already abundantly clear that *Wei Wuxian* was too resourceful, capable, intelligent and most of all *inquisitive* to stay anywhere he didn't want to.

Somehow, she didn't think Lan Qiren was considering *that*.

Stepping out of the conference room, Lan Wangji glanced at the elevator, hesitating for a heartbeat. Then he passed it by, making for the stairs at the end of the hallway.

To be honest, he preferred stairs anyway. Irritating jokes about never skipping leg day by his graduate cohort aside, he'd always found physical exercise grounding, a pleasant and necessary counter to the intensely cerebral nature of his chosen field of study.

More importantly, the physical effort would allow him to work off some of the seething *fury* still roiling in his stomach. He would *not* walk into that lab fuming. His temper had no place in that room, and Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian deserved better.

His *uncle*, on the other hand…

Stepping into the stairwell, Lan Wangji grabbed that thought firmly, shook it, and then made himself let it go, just an extra little bit of energy as he started up the stairs.

Perhaps the most frustrating part was that in some ways he *could* understand his uncle's struggle. The long and bitter battles they'd had throughout Lan Wangji's adulthood – over his major, his research, his life choices – had ironically taught him that he and his uncle were far more like each other than he'd ever dreamed as a schoolboy who couldn't imagine even the possibility of *not* being like his uncle. Both of them had come to their chosen fields in part because those fields dealt in concrete, verifiable facts, a clear core of data that formed an absolute ground on which to stand. Unlike his brother; Lan Xichen had dutifully completed his degrees in chemistry and physics, yes, but he'd then plunged himself into the managerial and administrative side of the academy while the ink on his doctorate was still drying, with every sign of contentment.

Although Lan Wangji did wonder sometimes if that contentment sprang from true interest, or simply familiarity. Peacemaking between stubborn personalities was a *very* familiar role for his brother.

But Lan Wangji had always been drawn to oddities in the data, the moments where he could peel back the veil of time ever so slightly, only to catch glimpses and hints of things he would never have predicted.

Lan Qiren did not like the unexpected.

Lan Qiren expected the world to be proper. Orderly. Logical. And when faced with a recalcitrant reality, his inclination was to berate it into submission or simply refuse to acknowledge anything that defied his expectations until it went away.

Lan Wangji understood the mindset. He'd shared it, once. But his uncle's inclination to stick his head in the sand didn't change the fact that Wei Wuxian *was alive*. And that the Yiling Laozu research project had not been designed with a living subject in mind. This was not a problem that would go away if Lan Qiren glowered at it long enough, and to pretend otherwise was simply callous.

Lan Wangji stopped on the landing and made himself take several deep breaths, easily falling into a meditative pattern that – irony – Lan Qiren had taught him as a child. Then he opened the door to the hallway—

And blinked in surprise at the soft, lilting tones drifting in the air.

A dizi? And not a song he knew, although it *felt* very akin to some of the ancient folk songs he'd studied, first during secondary school as a research project and later as a personal passion.

Intrigued, he followed the music, and was not surprised in the least when it led him to the door of the lab.

One of Nie Mingjue's officers was standing by the lab. At first, Lan Wangji wondered if the man was asleep – but the moment he approached, the officer's eyes opened, scanning Lan Wangji with a hard, penetrating stare before warming in recognition.

"Professor Lan. Meeting go well?"

"…Mn." As well as could be under the circumstances, he supposed. "Did you have problems?"

The guard – Nie Zonghui, if he recalled correctly, a relative of Nie Mingjue's who had initially recommended the man as head of project security – shrugged. "Some pushy types. I told them they had to wait on Doctor Wen's permission unless and until your uncle said otherwise. I suspect there'll be some shouting over that, but hey. I honestly feel more sorry for the shouters."

True. Wen Qing's patience was limited.

Nie Zonghui nodded to the bulky bag slung over Lan Wangji's shoulder. "Need any help with that?"

"Not necessary," Lan Wangji assured him, and reached out to knock on the lab door.

Immediately, the music stopped – immediately, not the half-second delay of someone scrambling for the pause button. A moment later, Wen Yuan called, "Who is it?"

Well done. "Lan Wangji," he answered.

A moment later, the heavy latch clicked, and the door opened to reveal a sun-bright smile. “Hello!” Wei Wuxian chirped.

Lan Wangji blinked, startled.

Behind Wei Wuxian, Wen Yuan flushed slightly, although his smile was pleased. “We needed *something* to do,” he explained. “And, he’s going to *have* to learn, right? So I figured we could at least cover some of the basics.”

“…Well thought,” Lan Wangji agreed, as Wei Wuxian stepped back to let him enter, still grinning over Lan Wangji’s reaction. Deservedly; although Lan Wangji could hear the unfamiliarity of the word in the care with which Wei Wuxian shaped it, the greeting had been clearly enunciated and perfectly pronounced, without any hesitation over a word the man hadn’t even known a few hours ago.

Although part of that momentary surprise had nothing to do with words. Before, he’d been too worried about Wen Yuan to pay much attention, and Wei Wuxian had been sitting, his height not evident. But it was one thing to know that the man had been estimated to stand over 180 centimeters tall, and another entirely to realize that Wei Wuxian was tall enough to look Lan Wangji in the eye without effort.

Closing the door, Lan Wangji moved to set the heavy bag down and blinked when his eye caught on movement, as Wei Wuxian absently twirled something in his hand. Noticing his interest, the man smiled and held the dizi out for Lan Wangji to get a closer look.

“Did you hear him playing?” Wen Yuan asked eagerly. “We were taking a break, and he pulled that out, and he’s *so good*!”

“I heard.” And a part of him wanted to rush home and try to recreate it on his guqin, before the tune could slip from his memory. Was it an established song that simply hadn’t survived the centuries? Or had that been the original composition of a well-trained musician who’d lived his life embedded in that musical tradition?

That Wei Wuxian *was* trained was obvious – and to be expected. He was clearly well-educated in the old manner, and that would have meant mastery of music as well as literature and philosophy and etiquette and martial skills. But the choice of a dizi was interesting; it suggested he enjoyed music enough to opt for a simple and portable instrument, rather than something heavier and more prestigious.

It *was* a beautiful instrument. On closer inspection, what he’d taken for black lacquer appeared to be the natural color of the original bamboo, polished to bring out a hint of red that he’d never seen in black bamboo before and accented by an auspicious red cord woven around a small silver charm in the tassel.

He wondered if the bamboo grove the dizi had been made from even existed anymore. Or even the specific subspecies.

Although it did raise an interesting question. Lan Wangji had perused the descriptions of the man in the ice extensively, and done several of his own, looking for anything that might yield

hints about Yiling Laozu's identity. Given his own interest in music, it was odd that he'd never found any mention of a flute among the man's belongings.

"How did the meeting go?" Wen Yuan asked.

"Well enough," Lan Wangji said judiciously, nodding his thanks to Wei Wuxian. "The director agreed to set a quarantine."

Reluctantly, perhaps, but Lan Qiren was a man of his word, at least. Whatever his own thoughts on the matter, once he had agreed to something, he would see it done, and done properly.

Wen Yuan relaxed slightly. "That's good. I'd hate for him to have gone through all of this, just to get sick." He hesitated. "Is this okay, then? Us being in here, I mean."

"He's already been exposed to us." Better to take a small chance where the harm had already been done rather than to force the man into complete isolation when he was already under stress.

Reaching down, Lan Wangji began working the drawstring of the bag open. After a moment, Wei Wuxian tucked the dizi into the sash at his belt and ducked down to help with the stubborn cord – ah, and that answered the question of how no one had seen it despite so much careful observation; frozen in the ice, the wide sleeve of his outer robe must have obscured the flute.

Wei Wuxian's face brightened as Lan Wangji pulled out the first of the blankets, but Wen Yuan looked aghast. "Wait – are they really going to make him *sleep* in here?" His eyes darted around the lab, taking in the hard tile floor, the cold, harsh glare of the industrial lights, the dull gleam of steel from cabinets and lab benches and the flat slab of the thawing table.

Lan Wangji had to fight back a grimace. As a lab dedicated to the study of a rare bioarchaeological specimen, it was state-of-the-art; Lan Qiren had spared no expense for the project. As housing space for a living man, it was sorely lacking. "For tonight, at least. Wen Qing is exploring alternatives."

Exploring, but he had an unpleasant suspicion that this would not be a one-night arrangement. Wen Qing was unfortunately correct that they needed to keep Wei Wuxian under medical observation for a few days, at least, in case there were any delayed effects from his sudden awakening (and *freezing*). And unfortunately, there weren't many options safely within the heightened security of the project. Especially given the need to keep Wei Wuxian quarantined long enough to find some way to explain *why* the quarantine was necessary.

Lan Wangji was uncomfortably aware that Wei Wuxian's situation looked far too much like that of a prisoner rather than a patient or a guest. Particularly when he pictured it from Wei Wuxian's perspective, with no knowledge of where he was or who they were or even how he'd gotten into this strange situation in the first place.

At least they weren't locking him in – in fact, the lab *couldn't* be locked so as not to open from the inside, it would violate fire safety codes. But Nie Mingjue had stationed a guard at the door for more reasons than keeping overexcited project researchers at bay.

No, he didn't like the situation at all. He just didn't know what else they could do.

Wen Yuan started to worry at the corner of his lip, then quickly caught himself when Wei Wuxian glanced at him, eyes just a little too sharp, clearly having caught the tone of the conversation if not the content. "I just… there isn't even a bathroom. Isn't that bad?"

Ah. Lan Wangji felt his ears heat up. Wen Yuan was right, that was not good at all. It simply hadn't occurred to him to think of it.

Perhaps his uncle was not the only one struggling to wrap his mind around the idea of Wei Wuxian as a living, breathing person.

"I will arrange for a chamber pot of some kind," he said, quickly running his mind through his options. It wasn't ideal, but at least it should be a familiar arrangement for Wei Wuxian. Explaining how modern facilities worked might take some doing.

Even if the added loss of privacy made him want to wince all over again, because the lab had been specifically designed for *visibility*. There was not exactly a discrete corner available for necessary business.

At least Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue were the only ones who would be able to directly access the camera recordings. Those two, at least, he trusted to respect the boundaries the situation was involuntarily violating.

Wheels squeaked in the hallway outside, and Lan Wangji allowed himself a breath of relief. Wen Qing had said she would try to acquire one of the portable cots kept on hand by the medical research staff in case of emergencies; apparently she'd succeeded. So at least they would not have to ask Wei Wuxian to *sleep* on the table meant to thaw the ice that had preserved what they'd thought was his corpse. Somehow, that just seemed too macabre.

Not to mention potentially dangerous. The equipment *should* have been shut down and disabled. But Wei Wuxian was intelligent, *clever*, curious… and very likely to be in need of something to fill his time. A dangerous combination.

If Wen Yuan hadn't included "dangerous" and "don't touch" in the basics he'd introduced, they would need to rectify that omission.

At least for now, the man seemed content with investigating things as they were presented to him, running his fingers across the simple woolen blankets to study the weave and watching with interest as Lan Wangji unfolded the cot, even crouching down to study the understructure of the cot and flapping his hands at Lan Wangji until he figured out that Wei Wuxian wanted him to take it down and set it up *again* so he could watch the mechanisms in action.

Lan Wangji was somewhat surprised to find that he *didn't* find the added delay at all aggravating. There was something guilelessly charming about that bright-eyed interest in absolutely *everything*. And for his part, watching that quick mind observe and work to make sense of everything was…

Lan Wangji was well aware that many people in the modern era vaguely assumed, somewhere in the backs of their minds, that the people of past eras must have been somehow intrinsically *different* in some way. More noble, less analytically intelligent, simpler, *something*. He'd lost count of the students who were utterly appalled at the thought that, yes, that really *was* a raunchy double entendre in their classical poetry. And no few of his colleagues with the same assumptions, proving that it was not just a matter of youth and inexperience.

Lan Wangji thought he'd managed to avoid that particular bias, at least. But… watching Wei Wuxian study the way Lan Wangji locked one of the wheels in place so that it wouldn't roll out of place and then reach out to try it himself on one of the other wheels, tilting his head as he assessed the pressure required to push the locking lever into place…

Lan Wangji couldn't deny that it felt the way it might if a kirin or phoenix descended from the skies to drink from his garden pond some early morning. Half afraid to even breathe for fear of startling it away – or worse, waking from the dream, because as much as he wanted it to be, surely this wasn't real…

Fortunately, Wei Wuxian was *not* a phantasm, nor a jumpy mythical creature. The sharp rapping on the door that pulled Lan Wangji out of his thoughts didn't even make the man blink as he began helping Wen Yuan make the cot up with sheets and blankets – although, again, "help" might be slightly overstating his usefulness, given the man's frequent distraction as he poked at the pillow with a baffled expression.

Opening the door, Lan Wangji found Wen Qing waiting in the hallway with a rolling cart carrying three trays holding an array of covered dishes.

"You were successful, then?" he asked.

Wen Qing pursed her lips. "These are the safest options I could find," she replied. "We're lucky Cloud Recesses always keeps traditional dishes on hand. There shouldn't be anything in these that he hasn't encountered before. So hopefully if he does have any allergies to something, it will be one that he already knows to avoid."

Safe, Lan Wangji noted, apparently meant extremely *basic*. Probably a necessary precaution; even the traditional options would include sauces and ingredients that had been introduced hundreds of years after Wei Wuxian's time. There was nothing inherently *wrong* with simple fare; Lan Wangji had grown up eating a very similar cuisine, modeled after the diets of Buddhist and Daoist monks. But he was well aware that it was not going to do anything to help the impression that they were treating Wei Wuxian as a prisoner.

Which was likely why there were *three* trays; by sharing the meal, they could at least offer the hospitality of company, and hopefully avoid any impression that the plain fare was intended as an insult. "Will you be joining us, then?"

Wen Qing shook her head. “It would be counterproductive,” she explained. “I don’t even have the little bits and pieces of the classical language that A’Yuan has. If I’m in the room, I’ll just end up talking to you and A’Yuan and end up shutting Wei Wuxian out of the conversation. Let’s keep things simple for now.” She tilted her head. “Have you tried talking to him yet?”

“Not yet. After the meal.” Especially since they were well beyond lunch and moving rapidly into the realm of dinner. The thawing had started early in the morning, but in the subsequent chaos, he was fairly certain that none of them had remembered such banal things as *food*. They would all benefit from sustenance to take the edge off tired tempers.

Not to mention that Wen Yuan was a teenager and thus “starving” was more or less his default state of existence. He normally kept snacks on hand to fend it off, but he had doubtless been hesitant to pull out a chocolate bar when he had no idea if he could safely share it.

Which reminded him. “We also need to make arrangements regarding… sanitation.”

Wen Qing blinked, nonplussed – and then closed her eyes as she slapped her forehead with a sound of utter frustration. “*Ugh*. I’ve been so focused on everything else…” Sighing, she let her hand drop. “Right. Chamberpots were used in his time, right? I’ll see what I can do. And maybe see about getting a privacy screen set up so we can block at least some of the cameras.” She snorted. “I can hear the whining now.”

Lan Wangji looked at her.

“*What was his last meal?* It’s what everyone seems to want to know about ancient bodies. Bog bodies, Ötzi, Peruvian ice mummies…” She huffed. “I *know* there are scientists on the project who planned to make a splash by publishing the first paper on what was in his gut.”

“We could offer them the contents of the chamber pot,” Lan Wangji said, straight-faced.

Nie Zonghui made a desperate I’m-pretending-not-to-listen-but-*oh-ancestors* noise, while Wen Qing laughed sharply. “Don’t tempt me. After all, surely his gut contents are as well-preserved as the rest of him.”

Rather, they had to hope that they were. Otherwise the situation was going to become very critical *very* quickly – which was one of the reasons Wen Qing wanted to keep the man under observation.

She sighed. “But no. That’s too invasive for me to be comfortable with. They’ll just have to resign themselves to actually *asking* the man what he ate, like we do with anyone else.” She shook her head. “So. Chamberpot, and figure out a better solution when we can. And while we’re at it, bathing facilities as well. I don’t think there are any showers in the building outside the emergency ones, and those are definitely *not* useful if you actually want to be *clean*.” She waved a hand. “Never mind. We’ll manage something. Go eat; I’ll be taking over one of the desks in the observation office for a while, in case you need me for anything.”

Meaning all he would need to do would be to activate the intercom between the rooms – or just shout to Nie Zonghui through the door – should something go wrong. That was… something of a relief. The situation might feel unreal, but they had to be careful to avoid making assumptions.

He pulled the cart into the lab and turned to see Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian tidying up the notebooks and pencils scattered across the thawing platform, which was the closest thing they had to a table. Once a space was cleared, Lan Wangji transferred the trays to it and began uncovering the various dishes and setting out the bowls, cups and chopsticks stacked in the lower compartment.

Wen Qing had included *tea*. Not only a brewed pot ready to drink, but also leaves and an electric kettle to heat water for more. Truly the compassion of a doctor by calling.

Or perhaps simply an apology for the food. Apparently Wen Qing had opted for *extremely* simple; plain rice, tofu in a clear broth, simple steamed vegetables and greens, plain chicken. No seasonings except for salt and pepper. All cooked well, of course. And a good choice if the goal was to keep ingredients easily recognizable and thus avoidable if needed. But not exactly the stuff of culinary dreams.

Although Wei Wuxian seemed to find the spread oddly fascinating. On the other hand, perhaps that was not so odd at all. In a time without the conveniences of modern storage technology and international shipping, there would be a great deal of information encoded in even such simple things as fruits and vegetables. The season. The region. Even subtle things, like the local environment.

The university tried to buy local as much as possible, as a matter of principle and good regional relations. As did Lan Wangji, out of personal preference. But he'd never really paid truly close attention to it, confident that certain staples would always be readily available as needed. And, of course, *local* meant something very different in the time of automobiles and refrigeration – and there were limits to how much local production could cover, when feeding an entire university.

He wondered what Wei Wuxian made of what he saw. Was he trying to gauge how long he had been unaware of the world, using the produce available to get a sense of the season? Were there strange combinations of things that should not be in season at the same time at all?

Even the rice was subject to the same inquisitive scrutiny, Wei Wuxian poking at it with his chopsticks before deftly plucking out a few grains to nibble at them quizzically. Which… made sense, actually. In his time, rice agriculture had still been slowly making its way north from where it had begun in the Yangtze basin in the south. And it was unlikely that this particular variety of rice had even *existed* in Wei Wuxian's time.

Not to mention, this was plain, machine-polished white rice. Utterly basic by modern standards. And from the perspective of a time when polishing fundamentally had to be done by hand, it surely looked like an incredible luxury compared to the simplicity of everything else. Small wonder the man seemed so quizzical.

…Or perhaps he was simply wondering why Lan Wangji was simply standing there *watching* him, he realized suddenly, as Wen Yuan sat down on one of the work stools that Lan Wangji hadn't even noticed him fetching and cast a quick, confused glance that wasn't quite subtle enough at Lan Wangji. Feeling his ears heating again, Lan Wangji quickly sat down and picked up his own chopsticks.

The meal was quiet. Lan Wangji ate without speaking out of habit; his uncle had been strict about such things when he was a child. And once his investigation was done, Wei Wuxian began eating with the focus of someone who had not eaten for some time. Come to think of it, perhaps he had not, even within his extremely foreshortened subjective timeline. After all, he had been carrying no supplies with him in the ice, only what he was wearing. Perhaps he had been traveling with others, and gotten separated from his company. If that had happened some time before he had frozen, then hunger was to be expected.

Although the man *did* wrinkle his nose in annoyance when he sipped at the admittedly bland broth. And the moment he discovered the contents of the pepper shaker that had been included, he proceeded to apply it liberally enough that *Lan Wangji's* nose was itching in psychosomatic sympathy.

Apparently he prefers strong flavors in food.

A little glimpse into Wei Wuxian as a *person*, rather than a miraculous relic of the distant past. Something about that felt oddly… *charming*, actually.

Wen Yuan *did* sneeze, before turning back to…

Ah. "Wen Yuan," Lan Wangji said sternly. He'd eaten his fill before the other two, being neither a growing teenager nor a time-displaced traveler. "Do not do homework while eating."

The boy started, face turning red, and guiltily set the notebook he'd been furtively scribbling equations in next to his neglected rice bowl. "But…" he said weakly.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head, studying the numbers scrawled with uncharacteristic messiness on the pages. Chuckled, and tapped one in particular.

Wen Yuan blinked. And then thumped his head against the open pages. "*Augh!*" he groaned, groping for his eraser.

Wei Wuxian laughed, picking up his cup to sip at the tea. And then did a double take of his own, blinking at the amber-red liquid. Now why…

Oh. Lan Wangji had forgotten. In Wei Wuxian's time, tea had still been a medicinal herb and an aid for meditation, not an everyday beverage. And the processing techniques were still being developed. No wonder he found the taste unfamiliar. Yet another tiny detail Lan Wangji hadn't thought about…

Lan Wangji paused, replaying the exchange in his mind. "Did you teach him Arabic numerals?"

Wen Yuan flushed. “Um. Yeah,” he said. “I mean, I was trying to come up with important phrases for him to know, and then I remembered that in a lot of books and movies, one way bad guys mess with people is by messing with their sense of time. And there aren’t any windows in here, so…” He gestured to the clock next to the covered observation window, the digital display announcing the time in stark white on black numerals.

Not an intuitive thing to read, no. It only felt that way through years of familiarity. Even if the readout *were* in the traditional characters, it would not have made sense to Wei Wuxian.

“And the mathematical symbols?”

Wen Yuan had relaxed somewhat, now that he knew he wouldn’t be chided for drawing inspiration from action movies and spy novels. “Well… We’d gone over the numbers, and then I realized that I didn’t actually know how to convert the time system. I mean, I get the basics, but I know that the old system changed a few times, and I wasn’t sure I remembered *which* version he’d know. I don’t want to tell him something only to make him even more confused because it turned out I’d gotten it wrong. And I didn’t want to pull out my phone to check when that would just be even more confusing for him.”

Probably wise, and certainly thoughtful. Lan Wangji nodded slightly in approval, and made a mental note to speak to Wen Qing about the matter. A sense of time was important to mental health, and so was access to daylight and living things. Yet another reason this entire situation was less than ideal.

“But since we’d done the numbers already, and I’d pulled out my textbooks when I was looking for an empty notebook…” Wen Yuan shrugged, smiling ruefully. “We both wanted to take a break by then, I think. So we kind of messed with my math stuff for a bit. Just little things, mostly.”

“Ah.” And now that he looked closer, the mistake Wei Wuxian had caught was a multiplication error. Which was still daunting, given that he’d had to learn a new system of symbols… but come to think of it, Chinese scholars had been using a positional numbering system since at least the 800s. Which was still relatively late for their estimate of Wei Wuxian’s era, but who was to say that the system had not been in use on a less official basis earlier still?

Which didn’t make what he’d done any less impressive, given that Wen Yuan was working with pre-calculus. Impressive enough that Wei Wuxian had realized that there was a problem, but to then parse through a system of signs that was still new to him, with the added distraction of other signs he did not know following unfamiliar rules…

If nothing else, the man clearly possessed a gift for processing complex information, visually and mentally, very quickly.

Wen Yuan was still watching him anxiously, doubtlessly worried that he might have overstepped. Lan Wangji did not let it show on his face – but internally, he huffed to himself. Doubtless there *were* those who would complain that teaching Wei Wuxian the basic skills he would need to simply function in the modern world would somehow “corrupt” the man. As if

a living, breathing, thinking man could somehow be preserved in a featureless lab away from all modern influences, the way he had once been preserved in ice.

He wondered how many of those complaints would come from the exact same people who had pushed the hardest for Yiling Laozu to be thawed for study in the first place. More than a few, no doubt.

Still. He might sympathize with Wen Yuan's efforts, but… He tapped the notebook reprovingly. "If you are distracted enough to make basic arithmetic errors, you are too distracted to study."

"But…!" Wen Yuan looked at him beseechingly for a minute, but when Lan Wangji's steady stare refused to waver, he drooped. "…Yes, Professor Lan," he said, closing notebook and textbook and obediently setting them aside.

Lan Wangji studied the boy's slumped shoulders thoughtfully. It was unlike Wen Yuan to worry about his studies. He worked hard to keep his grades up, of course, attending summer prep classes with the same rigor and focus he dedicated to his regular schoolwork. But he had always approached his schooling with a steady, calm confidence that likely did more for his results than endless cram sessions ever could.

Not that he necessarily needed to worry about exams. Lan Wangji had never spoken of it with the boy, but he was well aware that his uncle fully intended to pull whatever strings were needed to sponsor Wen Yuan to come to Cloud Recesses, no matter what his results in the Gaokao. Not that knowing would have changed anything about the boy's work ethic.

But Wen Yuan was sixteen. Still more than a year away from the university exams. And for him to be worrying about homework *here*, *now*, under circumstances such as this…

Waiting for Wen Yuan to meet his eyes again, Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow ever so slightly.

Wen Yuan looked down at the table. "…I thought, maybe, if I could get ahead on everything, show I could keep my grades up, Director Lan might let me keep helping with the project. Especially since things are kind of… different than expected." He sighed. "I guess that was stupid. I can't go to classes *and* stay quarantined, school is basically the opposite of quarantine."

"Wen Qing and I spoke," Lan Wangji told him. "If you are interested, I believe we can offer an internship."

Nie Mingjue had actually been the first to suggest it. "*Kid's already in the thick of this*," he'd pointed out bluntly. "*You can* try *sidelining him at this point, I suppose. But also, if you want to convince Wei Wuxian that he's safe with us? Letting the kid who jumped between him and the angry guys with weapons hang out with him is going to work like nothing else.*"

Perhaps more importantly, Wei Wuxian seemed to be fond of Wen Yuan, if Lan Wangji read the affection softening the man's clear amusement as he watched their exchange correctly. Had Wei Wuxian had a younger brother, perhaps? Or even a son of his own; he seemed young for such things even by ancient standards, but given the turbulence of the era…

Lan Wangji hoped not. Learning how much time had passed while he was in the ice would be hard enough, without the added burden of having left a *child* behind in the distant past.

Of course, it all depended on whether or not Wen Yuan wanted to stay with the project. Nie Mingjue's confidence aside, it would have been perfectly reasonable for Wen Yuan to have reservations. The boy had been *shot at*, after all, and by a man whose first priority should have been to protect him.

But apparently that was not an obstacle.

"Wen Qing believes she can arrange for your summer school to be done remotely." Lan Wangji met the boy's wide eyes. "This is contingent on you maintaining high marks. You must also maintain quarantine, which will require staying here in Cloud Recesses for the remainder of the summer."

Wen Yuan nodded without hesitation. "And when the school year starts?"

Good. He was thinking about the fact that this was not a short term commitment. "We will reassess."

Wen Yuan's regular school was unlikely to be so flexible about remote learning. Which was appropriate. School was as much a matter of social learning as intellectual. But the boy was also correct in noting that a crowded school full of teenagers mingling was effectively the opposite of a quarantine. With luck, by then Wen Qing would have come up with an immunization regimen to allow safer interaction, and they would have progressed far enough in communication to actually explain and start the process. But such regimens took time to be effective. Most likely, Wen Yuan would have to withdraw from direct participation in the project for at least a month or two once school started. Which, again, was not a bad thing for him.

Which reminded him. "You will not be able to spend time with your friends while quarantined."

Wen Yuan shrugged. "Jin Ling's grandfather made him fly to Shandong for the summer," he said. "Zizhen's family is going to be traveling. And Jingyi was already expecting me to spend a lot of my time here." His lips quirked, wry and amused. "They're going to *flip out* when this all goes public. They're already pestering me for *super-secret inside information*, when I *told* them there are rules about telling people about it…" His cheeks puffed.

"That is all the more important now."

Wen Yuan nodded solemnly. "I know. It's not just my friends, *everyone* is going to flip out. He shouldn't have to deal with that while he's still adjusting to *being* here in the first place!" The boy pursed his lips. "But if I'm staying here, I'm going to need to get my stuff… and that means I'll need to stay away from him for a while, right? In case I get exposed to something new."

Lan Wangji nodded. "Caution is best."

In truth, they were taking a not insubstantial risk with the arrangement as they were. Wen Yuan being a teenager did not only raise issues of exposure and the risk that he might blurt something incautious in a teenage boy's urge to impress friends. There was no way that some of the scientists on the project *wouldn't* object to a teenager – not even a university student! – suddenly being included like this, especially when the researchers themselves had undergone an intensely competitive selection process to be part of the project.

But Nie Mingjue was right that the rapport Wen Yuan had already established with Wei Wuxian would go far in setting the man at ease. And the boy had already demonstrated that he was approaching the situation thoughtfully and conscientiously.

Not to mention that, of the limited circle of individuals currently in the know about this utterly unexpected twist in the project, Wen Yuan was quite possibly the only one outside of Lan Wangji himself who had the necessary cultural and language knowledge to assist. Perhaps he had not trusted his memory of the specific archaic timekeeping system he would need to reference, but at least he had been *aware* of what he did not know.

Wen Yuan glanced at Wei Wuxian, who was still watching both of them with interest. "If I'm going to be away for a while, though… Is there a way to explain that I'll be back soon? I don't want him to think that I just up and *left*."

"That should be manageable." Possibly complicated. Something like that was a bit abstract for what they had accomplished so far, and Lan Wangji was hesitant to use terms that in the classics were frequently associated with soldiers going to war, filial sons returning home to be with dying parents, and forlorn lovers waiting by riverbanks. Still. He should be able to cobble together something. Although he should take his time, to avoid misunderstandings.

"You said you taught him some basics," he said. "Such as?"

Wen Yuan brightened, grabbing up a different notebook that had been set slightly aside from the others. "Right! I mean, mostly it was basic phrases, but…"

He started to rise off his seat, eagerly pushing the open notebook towards Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji stopped him with a finger pinning the notebook to the table and slanted a pointed look at the bowl of rice still sitting forgotten in front of him.

Wen Yuan flushed slightly – and then significantly redder when his stomach chose that moment to let loose with a surprisingly loud gurgle.

Wei Wuxian laughed as the boy buried his face in his hands, picking up his chopsticks again to transfer some of the remaining vegetables into Wen Yuan's bowl. Wen Yuan wrinkled his nose at the man, who only grinned wider yet in response, and then picked up his chopsticks with a look of pure determination.

Determination that was only necessary for the first bite, at which point he apparently recalled that not only was he a growing teenage boy who'd missed lunch, but he'd also only picked at his breakfast that morning, too wound up to eat properly. Satisfied, Lan Wangji turned his attention to the notebook.

The first few pages were something of a jumbled mess – quite unlike Wen Yuan's usual careful notes, but it was obvious even at a glance that these were not so much notes as the working out of what must have begun as an ad hoc and haphazard process.

And a collaborative one. Part of the jumble was obviously the result of two people writing from different angles. Wei Wuxian's handwriting was easy to identify; flowing, but with odd stutters where his obvious ease with a brush caused him to fumble a pencil – a lifetime of muscle memory was not easily overcome.

Which was likely why, a few pages in, Wei Wuxian had claimed an entire page of the notebook for what seemed to be practice – or perhaps experimentation would be more accurate. He began with the clear, precise clerical script he had used when communicating with Lan Wangji previously, but with each repetition, it was clear that he had deliberately relaxed his style more and more, letting habit guide his hand in the more natural cursive form. Any time a stroke faltered, he'd stopped and repeated the character, clearly testing different holds and familiarizing himself with the style required.

The practice clearly had paid off; by the end of the page, he'd become comfortable enough to write a short passage in the flowing, cursive calligraphy that adorned ancient paintings and bedeviled modern scholars who had to decipher what had actually been written. Although the line broke off strangely, the paper scored slightly as if the pencil had broken—

Lan Wangji felt a bubble of amusement, because he could picture what had happened. Wen Yuan looking over Wei Wuxian's shoulder to see what he was working on. Blanching at the sight of the dreaded cursive. Wei Wuxian looking up, seeing the expression on the boy's face, and laughing hard enough that he lost control of the pencil.

Turning the page, Lan Wangji paused. Apparently that break in the language experiments had served as inspiration of sorts; the jumble of the previous pages was replaced by a tidy list of words and short phrases in the archaic script. Each item on the list was accompanied by… something that looked like a garbled version of pinyin, and then the modern script equivalent, along with the appropriate pinyin for each.

By the time, Wen Yuan had finished off the remaining dishes with the voracious speed appropriate to his age, and was draining the last of the tea with a grimace that suggested it had by now gone completely cold. Catching his eye, Lan Wangji set the notebook down on the table, still opened to the list of phrases. "Pinyin?"

Wen Yuan nodded. "I was thinking about that article we read a while back, about language reconstruction? So I tried to write down the old words the way *he* says them."

Lan Wangji had to stop at that, struck. He'd been so focused on helping Wei Wuxian communicate, he hadn't even *considered* the fact that they had a *native speaker* of Middle Chinese available now, able to actually *answer* the questions that scholars had only been able to guess at regarding the old language.

However, Wei Wuxian learning modern Mandarin remained a far more important priority. "And the modern pinyin?"

Wen Yuan had picked up the electric kettle, clearly planning to refresh the tea. “He was curious about the system… and I thought, maybe, as long as it made sense to him, it might help?”

True. It would be difficult to rely on the rime system of pronunciation, given the ways that the language had shifted over a thousand years. Guiding the pronunciation of a character by referencing other characters only worked if one knew how the secondary characters were to be pronounced in the first place.

From the look of the list, Wei Wuxian had grasped the concept easily enough. Several of the later archaic items on it had pronunciations written with a careful hand that was not Wen Yuan’s. It was possible that this was not Wei Wuxian’s first exposure to an alphabetic writing system, at that. His era would have been before the great travels and translations of Buddhist scriptures supported by the Tang, but Sanskrit documents would have been available in some of the still-new monasteries of the time. Lan Wangji doubted that the man actually knew the language – he did not strike Lan Wangji as a monk – but he might at least be aware of the writing system.

Lan Wangji skimmed the list as Wen Yuan filled the kettle from the wash sink in the back of the lab and set it to heat – a process Wei Wuxian was watching with interest, but a remarkable lack of visible shock, or even surprise, even as the water in the kettle reached a murmuring roil without any heat source in evidence. The faucet looked enough like a water pump that perhaps it might be passed over, but… Had there perhaps been some sort of portable water heating device in his time?

Or, Lan Wangji realized with a twinge of guilt, perhaps this entire situation had simply reached the point where any shock or surprise was simply being shoved to the back of the man’s mind, because he couldn’t *afford* to be overwhelmed at the moment.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much Lan Wangji could do to help, beyond striving not to overwhelm the man even further.

The first words on the list were perfectly reasonable. *Hello*. *Goodbye*. *What is your name? Stop. Danger.* (Good, he’d covered those.) *Where, here, there. Food, water. Tired. Hungry. Thirsty. Yes, no.*

Nothing complex, and all useful terms. Better, they were terms that, for the most part, could also have their meanings established using reference to physical objects or basic pantomime, which gave them an added check on verifying the correct meanings.

Some of the *later* terms on the list, however…

Lan Wangji pointedly raised his eyes to meet Wen Yuan’s as the boy returned with the hot water.

Wen Yuan’s smile was artful in its innocence. “People are going to be asking him about his stuff,” he said, not even pretending not to know what Lan Wangji was asking about.

Lan Wangji simply waited. While that was in fact a valid argument, he highly doubted it was the actual reason why *sword* and *dizi* were also on the list of "basics."

Wen Yuan's innocent smile became slightly sheepish as he poured a fresh cup of tea and handed it to Lan Wangji. "Besides, they're *so cool*."

Wei Wuxian chuckled as he accepted a cup of his own, having been watching their exchange with every sign of being highly amused. Lan Wangji wondered what he'd made of it. It was unlikely he'd picked out many words, but the tenor of the conversation had surely come across.

Nevertheless, they were being rude. Wen Qing had been right; it was all too easy to talk around and *about* the man, rather than to him. Even though he surely had at least as many questions as they did.

How did they even *begin* to explain that fifteen hundred years had passed while he had been frozen in the glacier?

No. That was avoiding the true problem. Conveying the basic facts of the matter was far from impossible. He'd already come up with several possible approaches he might take.

But something in him simply rebelled at the thought of simply dropping that information when there was no one Wei Wuxian could even *talk* to, to help him through such a terrible shock.

I should speak to Wen Qing about this. We would do well to have a psychologist's assistance, in addition to her skills as a physician. A psychologist might not know the *right* thing to do – minds and hearts were complex even with a shared cultural context. But one might at least be able to advise them on what *not* to do, and what approaches were at least potentially helpful.

Caught in his thoughts, Lan Wangji didn't quite register that he was frowning blankly at the notebook with its list of words until long, slender fingers entered his line of sight and snapped to get his attention. Startled, Lan Wangji looked up.

Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly and wiggled his fingers in an obvious "gimme!" gesture.

Clearly we need to cover please *and* thank you, Lan Wangji thought disapprovingly. And then felt a sudden rush of shame. It was hardly Wei Wuxian's fault that he didn't yet know how to formulate a request in the modern language. And etiquette was far more complex than simple rote words, with layers of nuance surrounding their proper use. It was likely that Wei Wuxian was far *better* at social graces than Lan Wangji himself; Lan Wangji had always simply fallen back on stiff formality in all circumstances, while Wei Wuxian had lived in a world of inflexible hierarchies and competing warlords, where being impolite or even polite to the wrong person at the wrong moment could easily have lethal consequences. Considered in that light, the man's casual air was an act of trust, in a strange way.

Nodding, Lan Wangji slid the notebook across the table, rewarded by a bright grin before Wei Wuxian picked up the pencil Wen Yuan had dropped and quickly wrote something before sliding the notebook back to show he'd added the character for "father" to the list.

Lan Wangji listened carefully as Wei Wuxian reached across the table and tapped the new entry, pronouncing it in his own version of Chinese. Lan Wangji listened carefully, and then wrote the pronunciation out, suddenly grateful for the linguistics classes he'd taken as part of his doctorate that had included learning the International Phonetic Alphabet. Wen Yuan's efforts with pinyin were admirable, but there were some subtle changes in the sounds as Wei Wuxian said them that pinyin was not designed to accurately reflect.

Although the word and character for father had apparently remained relatively stable over the centuries; there weren't many changes compared to some of the other words on the list. Which made sense; family terms tended to be less prone to drift over time.

Even so, Wei Wuxian listened carefully as Lan Wangji pronounced the modern form, repeating it carefully. And then reclaimed the notebook before Lan Wangji could write the pinyin to add that part himself, although he looked at the IPA that Lan Wangji had added with open curiosity.

…Ah. That may have been a mistake. He'd been thinking of recording the pronunciation for posterity, but there was also a practical aspect to using the pinyin for Wei Wuxian that he'd overlooked. And there was no point in trying to teach yet another system at this point. Fortunately, Wei Wuxian seemed to accept Lan Wangji's shaken head when the man looked at him in query – was that a gesture he'd already known, or had he figured it out from context? – and simply added the character for "son" before returning the notebook to repeat the process.

Lan Wangji expected him to continue asking about words. Instead, once they had verified the words for father and son, Wei Wuxian sat back – and pointed at Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan, raising his eyebrows pointedly.

Which… made sense, after that first moment of blank surprise. Hadn't Lan Wangji just been thinking that Wei Wuxian had lived in a hierarchical society, one of the last ages when noble clans had held real power and jockeyed amongst themselves to accumulate more and expand beyond their own strongholds? Knowing who was related to whom, and in what manner, wasn't just a matter of etiquette but also alliances and enmities and strategy. Of course the man would be trying to figure out how they were connected to each other.

For an uncomfortably long moment, Lan Wangji was tempted to say *yes*. It was not that he had not considered it. Wei Wuxian was far from the first to make that assumption. And Wen Yuan had mentioned the possibility once or twice, in the wistful wouldn't-it-be-crazy-if…? tone of a teenager contemplating a dream he would have liked to make reality.

However. Much as he might like to claim the boy as his son, Lan Wangji was not Wen Yuan's father, and he did not want Wei Wuxian's first question to him to be answered with a lie.

Picking up pencil and notebook, Lan Wangji went to write his answer, and paused. "Teacher and student" might seem straightforward enough, but there were multiple ways of expressing such a relationship, and each carried its own particular nuances.

After considering the options carefully, Lan Wangji turned to a blank page and wrote the characters for "teaching master" and "student." Hopefully Wei Wuxian knew enough about

the Han dynasty's exam system to understand the general image, although of course in the man's own time there would have been no imperial exams due to the absence of a functional empire.

Then, next to that, he added the characters for "master" and "disciple." He wasn't entirely comfortable with that reference – it felt too much like he was putting himself into the same category as Master Kong. But it captured the less formal and more personal relationship between him and Wen Yuan, better than the first phrase.

That done, he circled the terms, grouping them together. And hesitated again. He and Wen Yuan had never really articulated their relationship in concrete terms. On paper, Lan Wangji was Wen Yuan's sponsor and supervisor – but that was a matter of paperwork for Wen Yuan's initial participation in the Yiling Laozu project. Their actual relationship had simply grown naturally over the as a matter of shared interests and comfortable temperaments, a mutual love of the lost past and its mysteries – and, yes, occasionally offering advice, guidance, reassurance and a willingness to listen for a maturing young man who lacked in stable adult presences in his life.

Finally, he settled on "patron," which was… perhaps incomplete, but accurate enough. When he looked at Wen Yuan for confirmation, there was a rueful cast to the boy's smile, suggesting his thoughts were running on similar lines, but he nodded his agreement readily enough.

Turning back to Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji was surprised to realize that the man's attention on *them*, not the notebook, studying their faces thoughtfully as though *that* were the true source of information. And… perhaps, in a way, that was accurate. Doubtless Lan Wangji's hesitations had told the man that the answer he was being given was somewhat… uncertain.

Then Wei Wuxian reached over to claim the notebook again. Rather than turning back to the vocabulary list they had been developing, however, he added something to the page Lan Wangji had used.

Lan Wangji's own name. Followed by…

Gusu Lan?

Lan Wangji studied the characters, puzzled. The *Lan* part was the same character as his surname. Gusu, on the other hand… that was the historic name for the Suzhou province, where Cloud Recesses was located. But…

"Did you tell him where he is?" he asked Wen Yuan.

The teenager shook his head. "I thought about it, but… If he last remembers being all the way out in Yiling, wouldn't it just confuse him? We'll have to talk to him about all of that eventually, but… I suppose I thought it wasn't important enough to get into that just yet."

Reasonable. If frustrating; it was quickly becoming clear that the question of how Wei Wuxian had come to be *here and now* was neither easily addressed nor simple to avoid.

Wei Wuxian had watched their exchange intently, lips pursed as he considered their reaction. After a moment, his cheeks puffed out with a sigh – disappointment? Frustration? – and he reached for the pencil again, writing the character for *family*.

Ah. He was attempting to determine their clan affiliation – which, again, in the chaotic and constantly shifting political landscape of the world as he had known it, would be vital information, even a matter of life and death. In those days, kingdoms rose and fell in a matter of decades if not a few short years, only a few of them influential enough to leave names behind to history. *Clans* tended to be far more enduring.

Did that mean that Lan Wangji's ancestors had once been an influential family in this area? He knew they had deep ties to Cloud Recesses, stretching back to the initial founding of the original monastery by Lan An. Lan An had supposedly been a monk who had broken off to form his own sect, but such an endeavor would require funds and other resources. Considered in that light, it made sense that he must have been a member of a wealthy family of some kind, even if Lan Wangji had never heard of such a clan in his research. The Lan name was not so common that he would have overlooked it had it come up, but so many records had been lost to the centuries…

Wei Wuxian tapped the "family" character again with a long finger, and Lan Wangji belatedly realized that it had been written, not to provide an explanation, but to ask a *question*.

He hesitated. How to answer that? The university's name would probably be the most accurate in terms of scale, and universities were not that different from the old monasteries in terms of influence, but that didn't answer the real question being asked. He just wasn't certain that there *was* a way to answer without unintentional deception and confusion. "China" was not really an option; the term "Middle Kingdom" had a long and chequered history, associated with any number of kingdoms across the years. Adding "People's Republic" would clarify nothing, not when the phrase involved terminology that didn't even *exist* in Wei Wuxian's time.

Really, to have this conversation what they needed was a map. Except that, not only had he neglected to bring a satellite map of the country with him this morning – doubtless there were political maps somewhere in Wen Yuan's textbooks, but those were unlikely to be helpful – but pulling out a map would simply bring them back to the original problem. No matter how different the maps looked, eventually Wei Wuxian would realize what he was looking at, and that would raise massive questions that Lan Wangji wasn't ready to answer, not when that would mean forcing Wei Wuxian to deal with the implications of those answers on his own.

Wei Wuxian waited for several long moments, watching Lan Wangji curiously. At length, however, he huffed, shook his head – and, to Lan Wangji's surprise, picked up the pencil and crossed the "family" character out, firmly and decisively.

The message was obvious. *It's fine. You don't have to answer.*

Lan Wangji blinked, and winced internally. Obviously Wei Wuxian had noticed him hesitating. And come to his own conclusions.

I must bear in mind – to give no answer, or a slow one… is to answer anyway, in a different form.

Although he could not deny that it was a relief to have implicit permission to not give immediate answers. Allowing himself a sigh, Lan Wangji started to flip back to their vocabulary list—

"Wait!" Wen Yuan leaned in, catching and holding the page in place. Once Lan Wangji let go, the boy pointed at the crossed-out character and looked up at Wei Wuxian. "What about you?" he asked, speaking directly to the man and deliberately slowing his annunciation. Although Lan Wangji did not recall any of those words on the vocabulary list.

Wei Wuxian blinked, tilting his head and pointing to himself. Wen Yuan nodded eager encouragement, face brightening.

Strange. For a moment, Wei Wuxian seemed to hesitate, spinning the pencil between his fingers in a gesture that seemed half thoughtful and half stalling. Although his hesitation appeared to be partially surprise. Because they had not answered when he had asked? Surely it was rude to press a question without reciprocation…

But then he smiled brightly again, turning to write his response before passing the notebook back. "Yunmeng Jiang," he said, tapping the three characters he'd written with the eraser end of the pencil.

Yunmeng. As in the old name for the area roughly approximate to Wuhan in modern Hubei? That made a certain amount of sense; Yiling was part of Hubei as well, if far east of Wuhan. *Jiang* was unexpected, though. Presumably, like Lan, it was the name of a prominent clan. But given the man's name was *Wei* Wuxian… a subsidiary or affiliate family? The old noble families had been more than a single bloodline, after all; they'd been hubs of social, political, economic and military networks.

Except that, as with the Gusu Lan, Lan Wangji could not recall any references to a Yunmeng Jiang in the histories. Lan Wangji made a mental note to research both references later; if they were simply obscure, then it was likely they had been relatively short-lived as significant powers, which meant that they might help to narrow down Wei Wuxian's original time frame.

In fact, he should probably start carrying a notebook of his own. His memory was good, but it would be best to keep a record of things that came up in these conversations – topics to research, communication methods. Important vocabulary, as well, since Wei Wuxian should keep the notebook they were currently using for reference purposes. Not to mention noting down any questions that might occur to him now but were better to save for when their ability to converse was less stilted.

Which… Turning the pages back to the vocabulary list, Lan Wangji picked up the pencil, intending to add the words *what* and *about* to the list, since Wen Yuan had used them.

And then hesitated. Had he not just told his uncle, only a few hours ago, that language was more than vocabulary and pronunciation? Words were important – but without grammar, they

could never truly become *speech*.

If Wei Wuxian was going to learn to understand them, and respond in kind, then what they needed was not only words, but sentences. And given that Wen Yuan had already introduced the concept…

Well. They might as well start with the formulation of a question. He would likely be using that a great deal in the coming days, after all.

NOTES:

Gaokao (*gāokǎo*, 高考): China's national undergraduate admission exam. Only about 40% of students pass on the first try.

Master Kong (*Kǒng Fūzǐ*, 孔夫子) - the original form of the name and title that missionaries latinized as "Confucius."

I know it's a popular characterization to say that a bored Wei Wuxian would *of course* gravitate straight towards all the dangerous things. But it's not actually accurate to the character of Wei Wuxian in the novel; he takes risky chances when he has *no other option*, either to save himself or someone else. He does nothing with the suggestion he threw together in three seconds about resentful energy until he's dropped into the Burial Mounds and it's do or die. (Actually, I'd argue that his development of guidao has far more to do with his encounter with the old lotus farmer in the Lotus Pods extra than anything that happened in Cloud Recesses!) He throws himself between the brand and Mianmian *only* when he's exhausted every other option – and he tries to keep it from hitting him. No explosive experiments in the cave. Wei Wuxian in the novel is *pragmatic*, and part of pragmatism is saving your recklessness for when it's *genuinely needed*.

And since "Wei Wuxian has no manners" is another weirdly popular canon: Wei Wuxian actually has *better* manners than Lan Wangji in the novel, if you pay attention – in part because Lan Wangji's status lets him get away with being incredibly rude, and otherwise he relies on stiff silent formality. When courtesy is appropriate, Wei Wuxian is courteous… but he also *drops* the courtesy if the situation doesn't require it, to make a point, or to retaliate against someone who refuses to reciprocate his courtesy. He's also, canonically, keenly aware of just what he can and can't get away with – which is why he has so much fun playing Mo Xuanyu: he doesn't have to worry about those calculations for once.

Part of mastering etiquette includes knowing *how and when* you can (or even should) break the rules.

And as a side note, let's just note *who* calls Wei Wuxian "arrogant" in the novel, because Wei Wuxian gets accused of arrogance a lot… by blowhards like Sect Leader Yao, who complain about him standing his ground against *people who shouldn't have authority to give him commands in the first place*. Seriously. The people who call Wei Wuxian arrogant are Jin

Guangshan, Jin Guangyao, Jin Zixun, and sect leaders Yao and Ouyang. Usually in outright contradiction of what's actually happening in front of them. Anyone notice a pattern here…?

And since I'm busy poking at popular fanons… canon, Wei Wuxian's handwriting is described as "careless, yet poised" – not the "chicken-scratch" that seems to be popular in fandom! Given that he's both an artist *and* accomplished in the six arts, including calligraphy, he has masterful control of a brush. So yes, he has good handwriting. So I tend to see him as writing in the more "cursive" style frequently seen on paintings. (And the bit about cursive script bedeviling modern scholars… if I had a dime for every time someone asked me to translate that sort of calligraphy? Okay, I'd probably still be less than a dollar the richer, but the point remains!)

Speaking of which… regarding Lan Wangji's temperament: I read a meta once that pointed out that, in the Information Age, teen Lan Wangji would have turned out rather differently simply because ideas outside the hermetically sealed and homogeneous Gusu Lan ideology would have been the click of a mouse away. This is also a thirty-year-old Lan Wangji, much more in line with the Lan Wangji following Wei Wuxian's resurrection (but not knowing him well enough to joke) than the fifteen-to-twenty-year-old caught in the horns of a moral dilemma between how he's always been told is the way the world works and what he actually sees happening of the flashback era.

It's never actually established if the Lan diet is vegetarian within the novel itself, we only know that if they eat meat, they don't *slaughter* it inside the walls. I'll grant that vegetarianism would be consistent with the ascetic themes and the way the Lan seem to be based on Buddhist enclaves. But there's also indirect evidence against vegetarianism: we see Jingyi eating chicken with the other juniors at one point. Granted, that could be rule-breaking – they're also drinking. But he makes no effort to *hide* the chicken… and physiologically? If you are strictly vegetarian for an extended time, your body stops producing the enzymes needed to digest meat. Meaning Jingyi *should* have been sick as a dog the next day, if he truly lived on an entirely vegetarian diet most of his life.

(To be fair: I have no idea if MXTX *knew* that little bit of biological trivia, so this could be a case of RL science imposing itself where it doesn't belong. But it's still an argument you can make!)

Wei Wuxian may or may not be good at math… but he's skilled at talisman reading, meaning processing complex visual information and turning it into *comprehension*. And he had the benefit of watching Wen Yuan getting frustrated out of the corner of his eye! So he knew there was a mistake somewhere, he just needed to find it. (Also, fun fact: what we call "Arabic" numerals actually originated in India, were adopted by the Abbasid caliphate, and from there entered Europe.)

Wen Yuan and "because it's cool": just note that, in canon, Lan Sizhui is right in there with the rest of the juniors going "*that's awesome!*" any time Wei Wuxian breaks out the guidao. And Wen Yuan's worries about getting time conversions right is a shout out to all the writers and readers tackling the same problem in this fandom!

Given that I'm using the donghua as my main source of visuals? Yeah, women the world over would *kill* for hair like that.

Chapter 4: Taking Measure

Chapter Summary

> In which the backlash starts kicking in, and we find out what Wei Wuxian thinks of all this...

Dawn came early in the mountains, especially in the summer. When Lan Wangji woke, the sky was already pale as the first rays of the sun, itself still below the horizon, lit the upper atmosphere and set it glowing. Twittering outside his window announced that the morning birds were already awake and going about their business.

Getting up, he made his way to the bathroom, shaking his head slightly in a less than successful attempt to clear the lingering blurriness from his mind. He'd stayed up late the night before, writing up notes, researching, and attempting to corral his most important correspondence to a point where he could afford to ignore it for a few weeks. Luckily, he'd already made a start on the last, since he'd anticipated that the Yiling Laozu project would claim a fair amount of his time and attention.

Given recent developments, however, he had a feeling that his previous estimate of *how much* time and attention was woefully inadequate.

Luckily, his morning routine was straightforward and simple. Brushing his teeth, pulling his hair back in a strict bun before going out to the garden for a workout. Generally strength or endurance exercises, followed by Tai Chi; he'd found that the added challenge of moving through the stances when his muscles were already tired enhanced the meditative aspect, demanding he turn his entire focus on his body in the moment. Then a shower, followed by a quiet, simple breakfast taking in the way the world seemed to simply *breathe*, patient and unshaken, around his peaceful sanctuary.

Dishes cleaned and stowed, he paused in the doorway and looked at his living room, laid out in the traditional style to match the rest of his small home, and tried to imagine waking up somewhere completely different, where even the color of the *light* was alien to him, where he couldn't communicate with anyone and people came and went with no explanation or warning – without even so much as a by-your-leave. Knowing that *something* had happened, something had *changed*, but having no idea what or how.

He could barely wrap his mind around even that, and it was only a fraction of the reality Wei Wuxian was *living*.

At least they'd made some progress on the language problem. He'd intended to go slowly, concerned about overwhelming Wei Wuxian when the man already had so much to deal with. Learning a language, especially as an adult, was *difficult*. No matter how intelligent the

learner, mastering a language took time. Work. Memorization and repetition and accepting that all the study in the world would not protect one from making mistakes.

That last was the aspect Lan Wangji had always struggled with the most. He was well aware of his own perfectionist tendencies.

Wei Wuxian had seemed to enjoy the process, though, even laughing in what seemed like genuine amusement at the reactions his own mistakes had drawn. In fact, by the time they'd had to leave to ensure that Wen Yuan could make it to the bus running down the mountain to Caiyi, Lan Wangji had a suspicion that more than a few of those mistakes had been entirely *deliberate* on Wei Wuxian's part. Given the limited vocabulary at his disposal, there were *limits* to how absurd a mistake could be if it were truly accidental.

Language learning was difficult and arduous and he'd approached it as a *game*.

Which, admittedly, was far from the worst way to do things. People could muster a focus and energy for play that would outstrip even the most dedicated study.

Shaking his head, Lan Wangji went to the guest room, checking that everything was in order. After some discussion, they'd decided that Wen Yuan would stay at the Jingshi for the length of his internship; Lan Wangji had hosted him on occasion in the past, when Wen Qing and Wen Ning had not been available. It would be far easier for Wen Yuan to maintain the required quarantine together with Lan Wangji than if the boy was trying to live out of a dorm room left unoccupied over the summer, and it would allow him to fulfill his role as Lan Wangji's assistant by helping with note-taking and research at the end of each day.

They *would* have to make the dorm solution work on a temporary basis while Wen Yuan waited out the necessary two week isolation period to ensure that he hadn't caught anything on his run back into town. There was no way he could stay in Lan Wangji's home during that period without making a mockery of the whole effort, not when Lan Wangji would be working with Wei Wuxian on a daily basis. Luckily, Lan Xichen had assured them that he would secure one of the larger rooms with an attached kitchen, and Wen Yuan was quite self-sufficient – and reliable – for his age. He'd already assured Lan Wangji that he would be available for any research assignments or other long-distance support he might require, and that he intended to spend the rest of his time getting a head start on as much of his schoolwork as possible.

He had not mentioned phone calls and online games with his friends, but Lan Wangji knew that *that* was a given. As it should be.

Satisfied that the room was properly aired out and that the guest bed had been made up with fresh linens – which he'd done after Wen Yuan's last visit, but there was no harm in verifying – Lan Wangji closed the door and prepared to leave.

He was just pulling his hair back to put it in the usual bun when he hesitated. Perhaps he should leave it down? It hadn't occurred to him the day before, preoccupied as he'd been with more immediate issues, but…

His long hair had been one of his first acts of rebellion; he'd started growing it out as soon as he'd been free of the strict dress codes of mandatory schooling. He'd kept it shoulder-length ever since, assuaging concerns about dignity and propriety by keeping it neatly contained and his own stern reputation. But from Wei Wuxian's perspective, the nearly universal short hairstyles worn by men had to seem strange; only convicted criminals and exiles would have had hair so short, but it would never have been so neatly trimmed in that case.

Lan Wangji considered the question, then mentally shrugged and finished the bun. He'd worn his hair that way the day before, after all, so whatever impression it might convey had already been made. And it was familiar and comfortable, and therefore would not distract him.

After that, he pulled a light jacket over his turtleneck – summer it might be, but mornings in the mountains were chilly and the air conditioning in the lab was *aggressive*. With luck, Wen Qing would have found better arrangements by now, but given the lack of messages to that effect, he suspected she'd been unsuccessful. The outfit might become uncomfortable if they moved to a different part of the building or if the afternoon turned warm, but he'd packed a lighter change of clothing in his bag along with a collection of reference books and writing materials for that exact reason.

Going to pick up the bag, however, he hesitated.

In truth, he had hesitated over those reference books… rather more than he normally did over decisions in general, and ridiculously so given that bringing them should have been simple common sense. As Wen Yuan had wisely decided regarding time measurement, the last thing that they wanted to do at this point was to make an easily prevented mistake in translation that would only introduce additional confusion in an already confusing situation.

And yet. A properly educated scholar *should* know many of those references by heart – a laborious and demanding memorization process, yes, but deeply important in an age where texts were heavy and precious, and knowledge of the classics an important shared philosophical base. Wouldn't it only raise questions if Lan Wangji felt he *needed* references for something so basic…?

He huffed at himself and firmly picked the bag up, arranging the strap so that the weight would be evenly distributed. He was *not* going to let himself hide behind "it might confuse him" when he knew perfectly well that what was really at stake was his pride as a scholar: Wei Wuxian was clearly well educated and Lan Wangji's ego did not want to be found wanting.

His ego did not belong in the decision-making process.

Besides. Given that he'd been unsuccessful as yet in locating any reference to a Gusu Lan or Yunmeng Jiang family, the collections of popular poetry from the period would do a great deal to narrow down the specific time period Wei Wuxian came from. Not all poets were famed in their own time, of course, but works like those of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove had been well known. If Wei Wuxian recognized them, that would give them a reasonable *terminus post quem* for when he'd been lost to the ice.

And if not, then it was still good poetry in a witty style that he suspected Wei Wuxian would appreciate.

However, their main goal today was for Wen Qing to conduct a much more thorough medical exam to get a better sense of Wei Wuxian's overall health, which meant that, at least for the morning, he needed to focus on explaining what she wanted – and possibly persuading, if Wei Wuxian was, understandably, hesitant about the process.

At least Wen Qing had already made clear that she had no intentions of subjecting the man to blood tests, X-rays, an MRI scan, or anything else that was invasive or required heavy equipment until they'd established enough of a base of language – and trust – for her to explain the purposes of those tests herself. Which was likely to become yet another source of conflict with the other project researchers.

He did not envy her in the slightest.

Closing the door behind him, Lan Wangji paused for a moment to draw in a slow, deep breath, letting the heavy quiet settle around him. His home was actually located deep in the oldest part of the Cloud Recesses complex, surrounded by pines and far away from the main area. According to the histories, it had been built as a refuge for monks who wanted to withdraw into secluded meditation – hence the name *Jingshi* – and had been part of Cloud Recesses for hundreds of years. Which was certainly consistent with the style, although Lan Wangji suspected that over the years, through fire and rot and the necessary upgrades to bring in modern necessities like plumbing and electricity… well, the building itself might be almost as old as Cloud Recesses, but each individual piece that comprised the structure was likely rather younger. He'd always found that rather poetic.

He passed by the footpath that eventually led to the natural cold springs with a bit of regret – he'd always found sitting by the springs an excellent space to think, when he had the time – and instead turned to the path leading out and into the main university complex.

Like the Jingshi, the heart of the university had maintained the layout and structures of the original Tang Dynasty monastery, although also like the Jingshi, many individual elements had been lost and replaced over the centuries. Some of them very recently indeed; the university had survived the purges of the Cultural Revolution largely by grace of being remote, a slow shift to secular status across the centuries, and a fortuitous reputation as a center of practical sciences at the time… but it had not survived unscathed, and a significant portion of the old complex still showed the slight color difference of new wood that had not quite weathered enough to match the other buildings yet.

Lan Qiren had seen some of the old buildings burn – something Lan Wangji tried to remind himself of when his uncle's criticisms of his chosen field of study became particularly trying.

He wondered if Wei Wuxian would find any of the old complex familiar. The Cloud Recesses monastery was established during the early Tang, after Wei Wuxian's time, but there may have been something smaller in the area originally. Granted, they were some distance from Hubei, and farther yet from Yiling. Travel would have been risky and dangerous at the time, usually a matter of necessity rather than choice – although not always, and Wei Wuxian was easily adventurous enough that Lan Wangji could picture him as a traveler.

But even if he had been to whatever place might have predated the Cloud Recesses monastery, it was unlikely that anything genuinely familiar remained after so much time. Especially once one moved out of the carefully preserved heart of the campus and into the area where the actual *life* of the university happened. The school had, after all, long outgrown its roots as an enclave of recluses distant from the taint of the ephemerality of daily life.

It wasn't a jarring transition; even as the university had expanded, the developers had carefully stayed as close to the original aesthetic as possible. The interiors were state of the art, especially as one came to the area of the campus where the science and technology centers were housed, but the exteriors remained deeply traditional in design.

That didn't change the fact that once one moved beyond the screen of trees marking the historic monastery from the rest of the campus, suddenly all the buildings were much bigger. Too big to be at all practical without internal climate control and advanced engineering and materials to support the weight of the structures.

Still. At least they were not the glass and concrete monstrosities Lan Wangji had encountered at other institutions over the years. Even the newest buildings, constructed in the past few years as the Yiling Laozu project drew new attention – and funding – to the university, maintained the signature *look* of Cloud Recesses. For all his disdain for anything that smacked of romanticism, Lan Qiren had strict standards regarding elegance and dignity.

Or at least the appearance thereof.

Lan Wangji used his ID card to enter the building, nodding briefly to the security guard at the door, and walked into the building and straight into an argument.

"Miss Wen, you are being completely unreasonable!"

Lan Wangji paused at the entrance to the conference room, taking in Wen Qing's expression as she met Yao Yingjie's blustering with a cool, level stare that rendered her physically diminutive stature in comparison to the older man utterly meaningless.

Not that the man himself seemed aware of just how deeply his foot was embedded in his mouth. "It is beyond ridiculous to require those of us who are focusing our research on the Yiling Laozu peripheral artifacts to maintain quarantine!"

Wen Qing flicked an eyebrow ever so slightly upward. "You mean to study Wei Wuxian's belongings without even attempting to talk to the man himself, then?" she asked, a subtle sharpness in her tone.

The scholar had already waved a hand dismissively, the warning edge in Wen Qing's tone clearly flying clean over his head. Unsurprising. Over the course of the many project planning meetings Lan Wangji had been required to attend, he had noted that while Professor Yao did have a gift for reading a room, he tended to apply it… selectively. "Oh, eventually, I'm sure," he huffed impatiently, so quickly that Lan Wangji strongly suspected he hadn't actually heard the question before the words were in his mouth. "But the sword – the robes – the *flute*! These are priceless artifacts! It is imperative that we get them cataloged and safely placed in appropriate storage to protect them!"

Lan Wangji stiffened. Because until the previous afternoon, no one had *known* that Wei Wuxian had a flute. So what was Professor Yao doing bringing it up now?

Granted, anyone who had gone into the hallway could have heard Wei Wuxian playing, and it was not difficult to extrapolate from that. And Yao Yingjie was *exactly* the sort to simply assume that a ban on entry could not possibly apply to him and attempt to walk into the lab.

Still.

From the way Wen Qing's eyes narrowed, she didn't like the implications either. But rather than address it, she simply said, "I would think Wei Wuxian is rather more priceless. And you want to simply swoop in and take his belongings without so much as a word?"

Yao Yingjie spluttered. "Well, it's certainly preferable to him running about with them!"

Wen Qing's lips thinned, her eyes hardening. "My decision stands," she said flatly.

Yao Yingjie drew himself up to his full height – not that that was particularly impressive in the face of Wen Qing's steely stare. "This is not your decision to make, Miss Wen! I have offered a perfectly reasonable compromise, you have no reason to be obstinate! I will be speaking to the project manager about this, I assure you!"

"Do that." Wen Qing's expression did not change at all.

That, apparently, was not exactly the reaction Yao Yingjie had expected. The man spluttered, "Well – I will, then!" and turned to storm away. Although his dramatic exit was hampered somewhat when he saw Lan Wangji standing in the doorway.

Technically, courtesy would dictate that, as the younger, Lan Wangji should yield the right-of-way and let the man pass. But he was feeling just irked enough by the man's behavior to take a petty bit of pleasure in stepping forward instead, forcing Yao Yingjie to hastily back up until Lan Wangji had cleared the door and the man could leave.

Lan Wangji had never once claimed to *not* be petty.

Once Yao Yingjie was gone and the door was closed again, Wen Qing leaned forward and let her forehead rest on the table with a soft thump. "*Rrrrrgh*," she stated eloquently.

Nie Mingjue snickered from where he was leaning against the wall, surprisingly unobtrusive for a tall and powerfully built man. "One thing I've learned here – academic blowhards are a breed of their own. Although you do realize he's not *completely* off base?"

Wen Qing turned her head just enough to glower at him with one eye.

Nie Mingjue raised his hands. "Professor Yao's got his priorities stuck in his research publications, sure. But Wei Wuxian's going to want a change of clothes at some point. Not to mention a bath."

And Yao Yingjie had not been completely wrong about the importance of preserving Wei Wuxian's belongings, Lan Wangji had to grant. Because they *were* priceless and

irreplaceable. Not just for science – although, again, the researcher wasn't *wrong* about their value in that light – but for Wei Wuxian himself. The robes, his sword… those were all that was left of whatever he had left behind fifteen hundred years ago. He didn't *know* that, not yet, but once he did… surely he'd want to keep them safe.

Wen Qing sighed. "And it might be better for Wei Wuxian if he's… not quite so *conspicuously* out of his time," she admitted grimly, straightening her posture again. "You heard Professor Yao. He's still thinking of Wei Wuxian as a *research specimen*, in the back of his head. And believe me, that's not the only conversation like that I've had in the last twenty-four hours. Maybe they'll be better about remembering that the man is a *living person* and not a historic relic if he looks more like an ordinary person."

"Pretty sure *ordinary* people don't have hair like that," Nie Mingjue said wryly, and raised his hands again at her glare. "I understand your point, Doctor. But even if he looks the part, it may not help until he has the language down. Doesn't matter how many good reasons there are for it, doesn't matter that he's probably a bona fide genius – as long as he can't *talk* to people, a lot of them are going to act like he's an idiot who can't think for himself."

"I'll take acting like he's an idiot over acting like he's an *it*," Wen Qing said flatly. "I know the history of my field. *Ugly* things happen when a person becomes an *it*."

Lan Wangji was a historian. He knew something about that, as well. "Do you truly think that is a danger here?" he asked, troubled.

Wen Qing was silent for a long minute before sighing. "I *hope* not," she said carefully. "Your uncle runs a tight ship, and his ethics are as rigid as his worldviews." She shook her head. "But… I *do not like* this situation. When all is said and done, a person's 'rights' only exist insofar as other people are willing to defend them. And right now, the only people who know that Wei Wuxian exists at all, are a bunch of researchers who planned to build their careers and reputations on his dead body. I don't think anyone would be *deliberately* malicious… but thoughtless denial can do just as much damage."

Nie Mingjue rubbed his face, then huffed. "I hate it, but you have a point. I'll make sure my people know to watch out. I need to talk to them anyway." He grimaced. "And make sure they know they've got the authority to tell people to get lost. Zonghui doesn't have a problem with it, but… I'm still trying to figure out *who* we can bring in on this. I need more people than just me, Meng Yao, and Zonghui. But half my people wouldn't believe it was real if they saw it with their own eyes."

That was reasonable, in truth. Lan Wangji had not considered it in such terms, but Nie Mingjue faced a unique challenge. Most of the researchers had been present in the observation room when Wei Wuxian awakened; they might not have accepted the implications, but they'd seen the fact of it with their own eyes. Most of the security force had not been present, but any who would be involved from this point on would need to be informed.

He wondered how many would persist in believing the whole thing an elaborate prank. Given some stories he'd heard about past pranks… probably more than a few.

No, he did not envy Wen Qing *or* Nie Mingjue. At least with Wei Wuxian, misunderstandings were the result of genuine confusion and the lack of a proper shared language, rather than a refusal to understand.

“What of last night?” he asked. “Was there any trouble?”

Nie Mingjue pursed his lips. “Not that Zonghui mentioned this morning, but I have a feeling that’s not going to last much longer, given the way half the project team tried to ambush Doctor Wen with arguments about how *their* research should be exempt from the quarantine rules.”

“Most of which boiled down to, *I had plans, how dare you tell me that reality is making me change them*!” Wen Qing said dryly. “Which is actually a good sign. If they’re arguing with me, then they don’t think going over my head to argue with Director Lan will work. Lan Qiren isn’t *happy* about this, but he is backing us.” Her lips quirked. “If only because he doesn’t like challenges to his decisions.”

He definitely did not. At least for once that was working in their favor. “And Wei Wuxian?”

Wen Qing sighed, shoulders dropping. “No one disturbed him… but I don’t think he actually slept at all.” She grimaced. “I can’t blame him. Everything *else* aside,” a sharp wave of her hand indicated the entirety of the whole situation and how very alien and unsettling it must be to the man, “I completely forgot just how much equipment is in that room. Even with the main lights turned off, I don’t think *I’d* be able to sleep with all the blinky lights in there.”

Lan Wangji winced internally. Yes, that would… not be helpful. “Can we turn them off?”

Wen Qing huffed. “You don’t want to hear what people said when they heard you’d showed him how to turn the room lights off in the first place. Apparently some of the project team think sleep is optional, and privacy? What privacy?” She pinched her nose, then shook her head. “To be fair, that one at least had the grace to be embarrassed when he heard himself. As for Wei Wuxian… when I checked on him this morning, he was meditating. He seemed all right, but…”

“Have you found an alternative space?” Lan Wangji asked.

Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue both grimaced. “I was hoping to get him into a medical observation room,” she said. “But we don’t have that kind of capacity here, and I don’t want to take him over to the research hospital. There’s too high a chance of exposure to something nasty.”

“Not to mention that the place is swarming with people,” Nie Mingjue said dryly. “Plenty of whom would absolutely notice if a bunch of people from the university’s internationally famous and controversial research project start showing up on their turf. You put him in there, it’ll be a matter of days at most before word gets out that reports of Yiling Laozu’s demise were greatly exaggerated.”

Which might not necessarily be a bad thing, considering Wen Qing’s worries.

Except… there was no way that Wei Wuxian's remaining at Cloud Recesses would go uncontested. There *would* be a media circus, and posturing arguments over *custody*, and Wei Wuxian deserved to at least have the *option* of speaking with his own voice when nations started bickering over him.

"So we're left making do here." Wen Qing looked at Lan Wangji. "You got my email?"

He nodded. "I do not know how much help I will be," he warned her. He'd done his best to brainstorm ways to approach the topic, but there were limits. One could not exactly chain together the words for "blood" and "pressure" and expect to communicate any kind of meaningful information.

She nodded, unsurprised, as she stood up. "Hopefully we won't need too much," she said. "I don't want to do anything fancy, but I do need to get a baseline on his overall health, so we have something to go on to check if anything is wrong. And that's going to require using some actual equipment." She smiled wryly. "Honestly, you'd probably be just as useful as a demonstration guinea pig."

Lan Wangji considered that. And considered the concerns she'd expressed, and the overall situation. "That seems a wise approach," he said, as Nie Mingjue grabbed the large cart in the back of the room that was carrying the equipment in question.

Holding the door open for the cart, Wen Qing blinked, apparently not having expected him to take her comment seriously. Then she looked thoughtful. "Good point. We want to establish at the start that no one should be asking him to put up with anything *we* wouldn't."

Lan Wangji nodded. The point might simply fly past the other researchers, who were accustomed to authority, but if *Wei Wuxian* understood that overbearing behavior was not acceptable, the man would hopefully be willing to draw his own lines despite the uncertain situation he'd found himself in.

Wen Qing closed the door behind them, flipping the flag to indicate that the conference room was now unoccupied and available for use. "We also need to figure out if I *can* act as his primary physician, or if we need to bring in a male doctor. The last thing we need is a sense of propriety interfering with treatment if he needs it."

Nie Mingjue hummed as he pushed the cart into the elevator. "Oddly, Doctor? I don't think that'll be a problem. I'm pretty sure that of everyone he's met so far, he *respects* you the most."

Lan Wangji nodded. Wei Wuxian was playful, but there was no mistaking that he had immediately recognized Wen Qing as a figure with authority to be reckoned with.

Wen Qing smiled wryly as they entered the elevator and the doors closed behind them. "Isn't that a kick. The man from the sixth century has more respect for me than twenty-first century professionals."

Ironic indeed, Lan Wangji had to grant. Although also intriguing. Granted, Wei Wuxian came from a world before the stricter codes of the School of Principle had even been codified, let

alone become the standard. And times of chaos were usually harshest on women, but simultaneously could offer unique opportunities.

"*Is* he from the sixth century?" Nie Mingjue asked curiously. "I was under the impression that we weren't actually sure."

"The evidence is unclear," Lan Wangji agreed.

Wen Qing smiled wryly. "But going by the ice cores they took from the glacier, he's definitely from *before* all the canal-building and deforestation that happened with the Sui dynasty. So if he's not from the sixth century, then he's from some point even *earlier*, which does not exactly reduce the irony…"

The elevator doors slid open, and Wen Qing's words were abruptly interrupted.

"…do you think you are, telling *me* what to do? Do you *know* who my uncle is?!"

"Oh, hells," Nie Mingjue muttered, abandoning the cart to step past them and into the hallway. Lan Wangji quickly grabbed the handles and followed, although the doors almost closed on the cart before Wen Qing quickly hit the *Hold* button.

Standing in front of the door to the lab, Meng Yao smiled pleasantly at the fuming young man in front of him. "Oh, I'm well aware," he said.

The young man puffed his chest and tried to stride forward, only to come up short when Meng Yao didn't so much as twitch as his space was invaded, just continued smiling without giving an inch.

The young man's face was livid. "Well, if you know, then you should know better than to get in my way!" he fumed.

"Your uncle isn't part of this project, kid." Nie Mingjue stalked forward, his smile full of teeth. "And unless his name is Lan Qiren, he's got no say in anything here."

"And I've already spoken to your advisor, Jin Zixun," Wen Qing said icily. "He did not send you, and would not have the authority to do so if he had tried. You are not authorized to enter the lab."

Jin Zixun attempted to look down his nose at her. "You are attempting to cut everyone else out of the Yiling Laozu project by monopolizing access and I will not stand for it! I demand you open that door immediately!"

"Demand all you like. The answer remains *no* until you have followed all required procedures as laid out by Director Lan in yesterday's announcement."

Jin Zixun's face was rapidly darkening to near purple. "When my uncle hears of this…!"

"You have signed a nondisclosure agreement," Lan Wangji said. "Failure to honor the agreement will mean immediate removal from the project."

That, at least, seemed to sink in. Jin Zixun attempted to splutter and puff another threat, but faced with a united front, finally turned on his heel and stormed away.

The effect was somewhat spoiled when his angry jab at the elevator button failed to immediately open the doors; apparently someone else was using it, forcing Jin Zixun to wait, seething awkwardly in the hallway, until finally the elevator arrived and he could storm in… and then wait awkwardly again for the doors to close.

Another reason Lan Wangji preferred the stairs. The heavy fire doors were too hefty to slam, but at least they had enough visceral *weight* to them to allow a bit of satisfaction. And no waiting.

Nie Mingjue waited until the numbers on the elevator started counting down before glancing at Lan Wangji and Wen Qing. "Okay, I have to ask. *How* did that guy make the cut onto the team? Director Lan has his faults, but pandering to the *I'll tell my rich and powerful relatives on you and you'll be sorry!* type typically isn't one of them."

Wen Qing sighed heavily. But to Lan Wangji's surprise, it was Meng Yao who answered. "He's Professor Yao's graduate assistant. Professor Yao is one of the top scholars on ancient trade networks, but a lot of his research also informs the tourist industry. Which means a lot of his funding…"

"Comes through the Bureau of Tourism. Which means Jin Guangshan." Wen Qing grimaced.

Meng Yao hesitated for a moment. "I think… we should consider his threat of contacting his uncle seriously," he said delicately. "Jin Zixun has a history of… being rash."

"You mean assuming his social connections will get him out of any consequences." Nie Mingjue's grimace was a match for Wen Qing's. "Good point. And there's nothing like being told no that inspires a grudge in the ones who think they have a right to anything they want. He'd absolutely go whining to his uncle. NDA? What NDA?"

"And Jin Guangshan would be all over it," Wen Qing shook her head. "I can't guess what tack he'd take, but he'd absolutely try to leverage this for political influence – and that means riling people up."

What political influence could he possibly expect to gain, Lan Wangji wanted to ask… but hadn't he just been thinking about the media circus that would erupt when word got out that the man in the ice who had captured so many imaginations was alive?

Media meant cameras. Public opinion. Visibility. The stuff of political power.

"What can be done?" he asked bluntly.

Because Nie Mingjue was right that word *would* get out eventually. It *should* get out, if only so Wei Wuxian would not have to live the rest of his life a secret. But the last thing they needed was Jin Guangshan wielding that information as a weapon in his quest for ever more influence.

And Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao were correct that no mere NDA would be enough to control Jin Zixun's outraged sense of entitlement.

Meng Yao tilted his head with a wry smile, glancing at Nie Mingjue. "Well, in the short term, I think you made a good move in reminding him that running his mouth off has more than just legal consequences. He's used to money and power keeping him out of trouble with the law, but trouble with *Lan Qiren* is another matter entirely." He pursed his lips. "In the long term…"

"I'll speak with Director Lan," Nie Mingjue said. "We've been lucky this far. It helps that he selected for a type putting the team together; I'm not sure how many of them even *have* social media accounts that they actually use. Doesn't hurt that it still benefits them to keep quiet."

Lan Wangji found he did not like the idea of resisting speaking to the media out of *personal benefit*, although he did recognize the pragmatism of it. He liked even less the thought that they were *lucky* word had yet to get out, when Wei Wuxian had been free of the ice for less than a *day*.

Learning a language took time. It had not occurred to him to wonder how *much* time they could realistically hope for.

Wen Qing huffed. "Well. None of this is going to be solved with us standing here," she said briskly. "If I may?"

Meng Yao stepped gracefully aside from where he'd been blocking the door. "Of course, Doctor," he said with a smile.

Lan Wangji glanced at Nie Mingjue. "You will be joining us?" he asked.

"Just this morning." Nie Mingjue made a face. "I have a job to do, and I can't do it in quarantine. But…"

"But we want to make sure Wei Wuxian knows who we trust," Wen Qing said bluntly. "Nie Mingjue was in there yesterday, and he hasn't had much additional exposure since. It's a risk I think we have to take." Stepping forward, she knocked briskly.

A moment's pause. "Who is it?"

It was interesting, Lan Wangji noted. When Wei Wuxian had been speaking his own language, or practicing during the lesson the previous afternoon… perhaps due to the myriad of things that Lan Wangji had been concentrating on, he'd never really registered the simple *sound* of the man's voice: light and pleasant, midrange in comparison to Lan Wangji's own baritone. And while he did have an accent – hardly surprising – it wasn't an unpleasant one.

He was also relieved that Wei Wuxian apparently recalled the warning Lan Wangji had attempted to impart the previous evening about verifying the identity of a visitor before allowing anyone in. Hopefully it would not be *needed*, but better to have the understanding established.

“Lan Wangji, Wen Qing, and Nie Mingjue,” he answered.

“Ah!” A few moments later, the door opened and Wei Wuxian grinned at them. “Good morning!” he said brightly, before standing aside to wave them in.

Nie Mingjue chuckled as he reclaimed the cart and pushed it through the door. “Sounds like you’ve made good progress already,” he commented.

Lan Wangji gave him a flat look as he followed the man into the lab. Because yes, they had tried to cover certain basic set phrases like greetings. But those were the most *basic* parts of language, things that were mostly a matter of rote memorization. They didn’t even begin to get into the depths of what was needed to *communicate*.

If Wei Wuxian truly hadn’t slept the night before, he gave no sign of it in his demeanor. Glancing curiously at the cart and its array of medical equipment, he tilted his head, then moved over to the thawing bed turned table and began clearing away…

Suddenly intrigued, Lan Wangji stepped forward to look more closely at the papers scattered across the table. When Wen Yuan had left to catch the bus the previous day, he’d insisted on leaving all of his writing tools and blank papers with Wei Wuxian. “*It’s not like it’ll be hard to get more*,” he’d explained, “*and this way at least he’ll have* something *to do*.”

At the time, Lan Wangji had assumed Wei Wuxian would use the paper for sketching, given that he seemed to be something of an artist. Or possibly coming up with lists of additional words to learn, given that he hadn’t been at all shy about making suggestions. And there were indeed some drawings and what seemed to perhaps be scribbled notes here and there. But for the most part…

Lan Wangji *almost* reached out to pick one of the slips of paper up before remembering himself and looking at Wei Wuxian. “May I?” he asked.

Stacking a set of the strange drawings to put aside, Wei Wuxian smiled and nodded, waving a hand idly.

An impatient part of Lan Wangji *itching* for a closer look almost made him take that as good enough. He forced himself to wait.

Wei Wuxian blinked, then smiled sheepishly. “Go ahead,” he said.

Satisfied, Lan Wangji picked up the sheet of paper his hand had been hovering over. It might seem pedantic, but he wanted to *thoroughly* establish an expectation that Wei Wuxian should give verbal permission if he was genuinely okay with a request. Before he started getting less *polite* requests.

Wen Qing was perhaps not the only one uncomfortable with the inherent power imbalance of this situation.

But for the moment… carefully, Lan Wangji studied the slip of paper, tracing the complex pattern of characters and swirling lines with his eyes in astounded fascination.

“Huh. Is that a lingfu?” Nie Mingjue asked, looking over his shoulder.

“So it seems,” Lan Wangji agreed.

It had been after an argument with his uncle – if you could call it an argument, when Lan Qiren had flatly stated the course of study that Lan Wangji *would* follow as if alternative options did not even exist. He’d returned to his classes and, in a fit of pique, for his very next paper in his (“acceptable, if pointless”) class on the classical philosophies, he’d opted to research how the philosophical teachings of Laozi had transformed from a school of philosophy to a religion.

And had promptly been entranced.

Not so much by the religion itself, but by the way ancient people had made sense of and tried to create stability within the chaotic and dangerous centuries after the fall of the Han, as warlords and nobles battled for supremacy and everyone else simply fought to survive.

Only the acute awareness that the others were watching him – including Wei Wuxian, who had made it, likely for a reason – kept him from actually following the fluid lines with a finger. He’d written more than a few papers on the religio-magical practice of fulu and the development of lingfu, intrigued by the intersection of folk magic, the decidedly elite art of writing, and the esotericism of the various schools and sects with their individual and secretive styles.

He didn’t recognize the style of this one, and he desperately wanted to know more about it. There was a clean, efficient elegance to it, despite the fact that it had been drawn with a cheap ballpoint pen on gridded essay paper.

In fact… from the look of the other papers Wei Wuxian had gathered up, he’d been experimenting with different combinations of writing implements and paper types. Which… well. Given the strange circumstances the man had found himself in, it made sense that he would want the reassurance of something to ward away danger. But the apparently systematic experimentation made Lan Wangji desperately wish they could *talk*, because clearly Wei Wuxian had some sort of criteria he was testing for.

…not that he would necessarily get an answer even if they *didn’t* have the language barrier. The making of lingfu was, after all, an esoteric *secret*.

Secret enough that the earliest attestation of lingfu wasn’t until the *eighth century*, even though fulu itself dated to the fourth. He was holding in his hand *proof* that lingfu had been a complex and codified system long before they entered the historic records.

“So now we have magic talismans on top of the whole froze-to-death-without-dying thing?” Nie Mingjue chuckled. “Maybe he’s one of those immortal cultivators after all. Wouldn’t *that* be a kick for the historians?”

Wen Qing smacked his shoulder, hard enough that the big man actually winced. “Do *not* say that where Lan Qiren can hear you,” she said, tone hard enough to send ice down Lan Wangji’s spine. “It’s hard enough to get him to acknowledge that this is a *real and serious*

situation we're dealing with. The minute the xianxia jokes start going around, he will go into complete denial out of sheer spite, and that is *not* something we can afford right now!"

Oddly, Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrow slightly at that, an amused look flickering across his face at Wen Qing's quelling tone. Then he shrugged nonchalantly.

Suddenly realizing that he'd been standing there holding the lingfu the whole time, Lan Wangji made himself hand it back to Wei Wuxian. "Thank you."

Wei Wuxian accepted the lingfu back with a smile and a tilt of his head that seemed oddly… thoughtful, and Lan Wangji abruptly realized that giving it to him must have been a test of some kind.

But a test of *what*, he couldn't tell. And after a moment, Wei Wuxian shrugged and tossed the paper onto the stack he'd made of the others. Then he looked at Lan Wangji again. "Wen Yuan is where?" he asked.

Slightly awkward phrasing, but the curiosity was clear – and expected. "He traveled home," Lan Wangji said. "He will return in a few days."

He reached for the notebook that Wei Wuxian had left on the table – obviously having anticipated that it would be needed – but to his surprise, Wei Wuxian stopped him with a raised hand, frowning in concentration as he spun a pencil in his other hand, which Lan Wangji knew now was something of a habit when the man was thinking.

Then, to Lan Wangji's surprise again, Wei Wuxian picked up the notebook himself and flipped to the back pages that they had been using as workspace before adding things to the lists in the front, jotting down several characters before passing the notebook to Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji blinked. *Days* and *home* made sense; they'd covered those the previous evening. But *journey*…?

Had he guessed that from context? Wen Yuan's absence combined with the term *home* would be enough to extrapolate travel of some kind, particularly with the added element of time implied by *days*. But to have picked that out from a series of unfamiliar words, however careful Lan Wangji had been to keep his phrasing simple…

Well. It was not as if he weren't aware that the man was both observant and intelligent. Dryly amused by his own surprise, Lan Wangji nodded agreement at Wei Wuxian's limited interpretation, and then began breaking down what he had actually said.

Wei Wuxian's face fell slightly at the confirmation that Wen Yuan would not return for some time – unsurprising, given how the two had apparently bonded, and Lan Wangji could not help feeling at least a little pride that the teenager had made such a good impression that the time-lost man clearly thought well of him. But Wei Wuxian nodded his understanding, and then cast an openly curious look in the direction of the cart with its medical equipment that Wen Qing was setting up. Then he turned those bright, expectant eyes to Lan Wangji again.

Lan Wangji drew in a deep breath, and began his explanation.

These are very odd people!

Propping his elbows on the peculiar not-table, Wei Wuxian watched attentively as Lan Wangji started writing again, while also following Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue's bustling about with those strange devices out of the corner of his eye.

Seriously. What was *with* these people and little blinking lights, anyway?

If not for that, he might have thought… well, more accurately, back when he'd first woken up he *had* thought for a few confused moments that he'd somehow ended up in the midst of a group of *very* lost Lans, what with the snow-white robes and *Lan* Wangji. It wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility, after all; after Cloud Recesses burned, many of Lan Yi's people had scattered, afraid that Wen Xu wouldn't be content with merely destroying their home. She'd done her best to rally them back together, but it wasn't hard to imagine that some had run so far and so fast, or gone so deeply to ground, that they still had no idea that the war was over.

But beyond the fact that nary a forehead ribbon was in sight, there wasn't a Lan born who would wear such undignified short robes over nothing but underclothes, no matter *how* fine the material seemed to be!

Which wasn't the only oddity. Take the paper they'd so casually left for him! It was of excellent quality, smooth and even, without the least hint of feathering (once he'd managed to actually find a proper brush and ink, rather than the *fascinating* metal-tipped "brushes" that seemed to draw their ink from a well contained *inside* the handle, which was a brilliant idea even though the ink itself was of distinctly poor quality in most cases – to say nothing of the odd, slender sticks of something like charcoal that could simply be *rubbed away* when necessary, very handy!). It was also rather flimsy – excellent for showcasing the fineness of the paper, terrible for practical use!

And, notably, not a single sheet of mulberry paper or stick of cinnabar in sight.

Not that that would necessarily slow him down. After that first stint in the Burial Mounds and then dealing with Wen Chao with no weapons to hand outside of what he could find or whistle up… well. He'd been rather motivated in finding ways to use nonstandard materials.

But after seeing the way Lan Wangji had reacted to the experimental talisman – it wasn't even a *functional* design, because he was not stupid enough to make an active talisman using materials with unknown properties, especially when he was using a writing implement that unpredictably spat out a sticky tacky gooey blob of is-that-ink!… Well. The man seemed familiar with the *idea* of talismans, but he acted like he'd never actually *seen* one.

So. Probably not a cultivation sect at all. Which was a relief, in a way, because if the bizarre flickering, buzzing bars of light embedded in the ceiling overhead were the result of a talisman, then as a talisman master Wei Wuxian would have been professionally obligated to be ashamed on the art's behalf. And he did not *do* shame, thank you.

Still. Lan Wangji, Wen Yuan, Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue had been quite hospitable, especially given that they had apparently been as surprised by his abrupt awakening as he had. He was perfectly happy to return their courtesy as much as possible. At least until he had a better idea of where he was!

Nowhere he'd heard of, which meant he was very far away, indeed, given that Yunmeng tended to hear a *lot* simply by virtue of the docks bringing in the river trade. He'd have at least encountered *rumors* of these people, if they were anywhere near the sect lands.

Not to mention that none of them had reacted to *his* name – which suggested that not only did they not know the war was over, they may not have known much about it in the first place. He had acquired something of a reputation.

And yet, the way they wrote, as if someone had simply decided to abbreviate the strokes in a way that felt systematic, even if he hadn't seen enough yet to figure out *how*, especially when sometimes the meaning of a particular character seemed to have *pivoted* somehow into a different word that was *close* but not the same. The strange ghosting sense of familiarity dancing around the edges of their words, as if he *should* understand what they were saying if he just listened hard enough… It was almost as if they had origins in the central lands, but were not *of* them.

Honestly, it brought to mind folktales about hidden enclaves of immortals tucked away in eternal groves. Except, again: no talismans. And annoying blinky lights. Not to mention the very rude guards attacking a junior for mouthing off to them!

Granted, immortals were not known for being nice or kind. Still. It didn't *fit*.

Of course, it didn't help that he had no memory of what had happened to get him here. When he tried to think back on what he remembered before waking up *half-locked in ice*, seriously, *how?!*…

He remembered the Burial Mounds. Weeks and months and *years* of effort, the slow gradual thinning of the tainted energy. He remembered deciding it was time to leave seclusion and rejoin cultivation society. But when he got to the part about actually setting off down the mountain…

His memory got *fuzzy* at that point, in a way he did not like in the least.

But! That was something to worry about later. For now…

He turned his head to study the characters as Lan Wangji was writing. Wen Qing's name, and *physician* – hm. Interesting that he'd chosen the term for an herb-and-knife medic, rather than a healer. But perhaps that explained why she hadn't checked his qi yesterday.

First a Lan, now a Wen, and neither of them cultivators. He did not know what to make of that.

Still. Cultivator or not, Wen Qing did have the calm, clear confidence of a woman who knew what she was capable of, and while he'd never heard of someone using such strange devices

to take the three pulses… Well, he'd never seen quite a few of the things that this odd bunch took for granted. And he did appreciate the fact that she wanted to get a sense of his health *before* anything unfortunate happened.

Although he couldn't deny that the precaution sent a cold breath of unease across the back of his neck. Because it suggested that they expected him to be here long enough that something unfortunate *might* happen.

Granted, someone *had* tried to kill him already, so maybe they had a point in being cautious. Maybe.

He still felt like he should be at least a little offended! He didn't *usually* have people trying to kill him on their very first meeting! He hadn't even been *trying* to aggravate that guard yesterday, he could not be held responsible for sensibilities that were *that* easily offended, really.

Huffing, he nodded his understanding. And then looked pointedly at the strange devices and raised his eyebrows.

Watch, was Lan Wangji's response, and at that point the man had well and truly earned the eyeroll Wei Wuxian responded with, because really. What *else* was he supposed to do?

Granted, the suggestion made a bit more sense when Wen Qing crooked a finger, whatever odd setup she'd been doing apparently complete, and Lan Wangji got up to walk over to her. Explaining by example, not by words. Which made sense, given the circumstances. If they tried to work every step out with their current awkward system, it would take forever. Mentally shrugging, Wei Wuxian slid off the seat he'd been perched on and moved over to watch over Wen Qing's shoulder—

And then did a double take, and he would cheerfully own that, because rather than bamboo slips or one of those handy paper bundles, Wen Qing was holding a *glowing tablet* of some kind.

Wen Qing didn't seem at all surprised by his reaction. In fact, going by the amused huff and the way she tilted it so that he could see better, she'd probably anticipated something of the sort.

Which, glowing tablet and no formation or wards to be seen. That *deserved* showing off.

So when she offered it for him to handle, he happily accepted, because as mentioned earlier: Shame? What was that?

Carefully, however, because there was pointless reticence for the sake of face and then there was being *foolish*. If it glowed, then *some* source of power was involved. And while he doubted that any physician would casually hand over something with the power to carelessly harm, you didn't devote power to something that wasn't meant to be used. He had no intention of triggering anything.

He'd trained more than enough young disciples to know that "*oops*" was probably the most dangerous word in the world.

It was surprisingly heavy in his hands; metal, rather than paper or bamboo, although not heavy enough to be steel. And there was qi embedded in the device, a central source sending spiderwebs of power throughout the device, and especially to the smooth, flawless sheet of glass emitting that pale glow. Not human qi, either, for all that it bore a resemblance to the way a cultivator might charge a ward or talisman with power so that it would remain active without ongoing effort. The energy reminded him more of the bifurcated power that lingered when silk brushed amber, similar to the energies of a compass. He'd certainly poked at enough of those to know the flavor of it!

The back side of the device was smooth metal – likely meant more to serve as a grip and protect the holder from the snapping energy within than a functional surface. The glowing face…

He studied the blue field with its neatly arranged series of sigils filling the surface in a grid-like pattern. Each one was marked by more of the odd abbreviated characters; he recognized a few here and there, and others he thought he could guess, based on the pattern of the way the characters had changed that he'd seen so far. But not enough to be confident he could puzzle out a meaning, at least not without sitting down and working at it.

Pursing his lips, he handed the tablet back to Wen Qing, who immediately tapped one of the sigils. The glowing surface shifted, suddenly stark white with the sigil she'd touched filling the surface with black lines. Then it shifted again – more white, and still the sigil, but smaller now and at the upper part of the surface, the greater part filled with grey rectangles labeled with text. Wen Qing tapped one, and the image shifted again. Another tap, and now the surface showed the same mixture of lines and text he had seen on the paper Lan Wangji had repurposed to communicate right after Wei Wuxian had first awakened. And for that matter, all the characters on the tablet had the same oddly impersonal uniformity of stroke and width he'd noticed in those lines of not-ink.

Was that what this was – some way of writing without resorting to brush and ink? It seemed a great deal of effort and energy to put into such a simple task, though, especially when they'd already solved the problems of carrying ink around with those metal-tipped brushes.

He had *so many questions* and couldn't ask any of them. This was almost *worse* than the Lans' stupid silencing spell!

At least the purpose of the device in this context was clear enough. Wen Qing had Lan Wangji slide a tube of fabric up to encircle his upper arm, then used some kind of hand pump to force not water but air into it, going by the sound, until the entire thing had tightened to the point that it *had* to be cutting off blood flow like a tourniquet, even if Lan Wangji's face showed no reaction. Then she let go of the pump, and the air began escaping with a slow hiss. Then, suddenly, the stand that cuff and pump were attached to began *beeping*, as a display of – of course – glowing numbers lit up.

Really, these people were far too fond of blinking glowing things. And beeping.

After a moment, however, the beeping stopped, and the cuff released the remaining air all at once. Wen Qing nodded, tapped her glowing panel, and a grid of numbers and those strange symbols that seemed to represent sounds similar to the sacred temple scripts appeared. She tapped the same numbers as the ones on the stand, and they appeared on a line next to characters indicating… something to do with blood, and another with the heart?

That made sense; Lan Wangji had indicated that this was something like taking the three pulses, after all. He did wonder about the purpose of using the glowing device, though. Was it simply a convenient record-taking system, or could it be used in specific ways, analogous to how wards and talismans could be fine-tuned to specific circumstances or individuals?

Seriously. *So. Many. Questions!* He was going to explode from sheer frustrated curiosity at this rate!

And that would be rude. Clearly, it was simply a matter of common decency to ask *all the questions* as soon as he feasibly could.

…Which probably wouldn't be for some time. Argh. What had he done in a past life to warrant such cruel and unusual punishment?

Well, since asking questions was not an option at the moment, all he could do was observe. Most of the tests made sense, even if he had to puzzle over a few to figure out *what* sense they were supposed to be making. For one thing, these people clearly liked to turn things into numbers, although he wasn't clear if high or low numbers were considered good. Going by when and how Nie Mingjue would smirk and tease the unflappably stone-faced Lan Wangji, he suspected the answer was "it depends on the number."

But as he'd observed earlier, the tests seemed to be almost entirely physical in nature. Certainly nothing qi-based, and even when he couldn't puzzle out a sense of what was being measured – really, why had she stuck that thing under his tongue? Oh, and *of course* it beeped, it was getting to the point where he'd be more surprised if it *didn't* beep or flash or glow – it was clear that they relied on tools and devices where a cultivator would rely on qi.

Then Lan Wangji took his shirt off, and alright, *that* warranted some raised eyebrows. Because, yes, healers and physicians did generally need a few less layers in the way if they were going to do their job properly. Although he had to admit that he was surprised that someone who seemed so very *Lan* would do so in mixed company, scandalous lack of overall layers or no.

He was even more surprised that the man would do so when he *had* to know that they were being watched.

How, Wei Wuxian hadn't yet managed to figure out. Although he presumed it had something to do with the flow of patterned qi that pulsed through the walls and floors and ceiling and more than a few of the odd devices in this room. None of them were any sort of ward or spell that he could recognize, but you didn't gather and shape qi without intending to *do* something with it. And he wasn't going to touch any of it, since it was very obviously activated. Good way to get into the kind of trouble you might not get out of.

But after the war… well, he'd made a point of including an active spy-ward in the assortment of test-talismans he'd been making, using his own paper he'd slipped out of his sleeve. Which was potentially risky, given that he didn't have much left to begin with, but after everything, he'd learned to take precautions. There were too many prying power-mongers eager to get their hands on secrets that they had no business messing with.

Of course, he did have another reason for the raised eyebrows. *Someone* had clearly not been neglecting his training!

Although…

Reaching over, he poked the muscles of Lan Wangji's shoulders thoughtfully. Because what with one thing and another, he'd dealt with more than enough bodies to identify a sword style based on musculature alone. And while Lan Wangji was *quite* impressively fit, it looked like he'd never trained with a sword at all. Not just the way he moved and the lack of calluses. He simply didn't have the shoulder mass of someone who was accustomed to swinging around what was, after all, a fairly heavy piece of sharp steel, no matter how spiritually charged.

Although the lack of calluses was odd for other reasons. Lan Wangji was a scholar, and carried himself as a man of refinement – *surely* he'd had at least basic training in the bow and the horse?

Then again, it was clear that the man had led a very sheltered life, given that not a single scar dared to mar that porcelain skin. Even with a fully developed and quite powerful core, Wei Wuxian had collected his share of marks.

Although ever since he'd awakened in this strange place, his core had felt… off. Not drained, exactly, but almost… bruised? Or maybe *strained* was a better term for it; almost like the muscle aches that came after a battle had lasted so long that you'd overrun what your body could endure and then *kept going* because the only alternative was death. As if he'd been constantly pushing the very edge of draining himself, for a long time.

Which didn't make sense. He'd run the edge of core depletion during the war, of course – everyone had, at least a few times, even non-combatant cultivators like Jiang Yanli, and he'd been in the thick of things more than most. But he'd been careful to pace himself in the Burial Mounds, resting and restoring his reserves completely before starting a new phase. He was fairly certain that he'd been the strongest he'd ever been when he prepared to leave.

And now here he was, waking *out of ice*, in a place like nothing he'd ever heard of, with a *sore core*. He hadn't even known that was a thing!

At least he hadn't seen any more of the strange projectile weapons from that first day. He'd managed to catch that one purely because he'd seen the attack coming, even if he hadn't guessed its precise nature. But if he didn't see one… Well. Even a powerful cultivator could be killed by an arrow they didn't see coming. And that thing had the potential to do far more damage than an arrow. Silk wouldn't catch *that*.

Although properly warded silk might? Something to explore, at least. He did *not* want to have to go back to the hypervigilance of the war years.

Still, it was hard to square a weapon like *that* against Lan Wangji's nice, smooth, flawless skin. Granted, protected noble heirs safely sheltered behind trained guards were nothing new… but that didn't fit with one of said guards turning a weapon on said noble heir's student.

Then again. Guards who believed carrying weapons gave them the authority to use said weapons as they pleased? Also not new. Likewise factional struggles for power within a sect or clan… and while he might not understand the words, the *tone* of the arguments he'd heard through the door of this odd cell were enough to tell him that one was brewing out there. And it had something to do with *him*.

Hopefully not the way certain *other* arguments had. He'd hate to unleash angry ghosts on these people, but if he had to fight his way out, he wasn't going to hold back, either.

If he had to, of course. It hadn't slipped his notice that the door didn't appear to lock against anyone inside the room. And thus far, everyone he'd actually met except for the rude guard had treated him with a kind of artless courtesy. He had nothing against being polite in return!

Speaking of, Nie Mingjue was going to crack a rib trying to suppress his laughter like that, and even stern Wen Qing's eyes were dancing over the recording tablet she'd raised like a fan to hide her lips, so he'd probably delayed them with shamelessness enough for one sitting! Grinning, he patted Lan Wangji's bared shoulder one last time as thanks and apology for the man's forbearance, then retreated back to watching over Wen Qing's shoulder.

Hm. Those were painfully red ears, for all that the man's face never so much as twitched. He'd have to come up with a proper apology gift.

And now he had a better sense of what these people did and didn't consider acceptable. Remarkably relaxed about clothing, but touching was considered bold – although, given the lack of shock in the suppressed laughter, not scandalously so. Good to know.

Shaking her head, Wen Qing picked up yet another odd device – some sort of flexible cord with a metal disc at one end and attached to a rod of metal that separated into two equal branches that curved inwards at the end, the tips covered with some kind of dull black material. Which must have been cushioning of some kind, because she settled those curved ends in her own ears, and then placed the metal disc against Lan Wangji's chest, frowning as she appeared to listen for a few moments, moved the disc, and listened again, periodically giving Lan Wangji instructions that seemed to do with changing the pattern of his breathing. After repeating the sequence once or twice, she shifted the disc to Lan Wangji's back, and they did it all over again before she nodded and pulled the earpieces out, letting the tool dangle from her neck as she went back to tap-writing on the metal tablet again.

Wei Wuxian had assumed that she would move on to another set of tests after that, and Lan Wangji started to move as if he expected the same, but instead Wen Qing waved the man back, and then pulled the listening cord off her neck and held it out to Wei Wuxian, one eyebrow raised pointedly.

Which, well! Far be it for him to turn down an open invitation!

Settling the earpieces into place was… ugh, that was *not* a comfortable sensation, although from the quirk of her lips, at least he wasn't the only one to think so. Then she set the disc against Lan Wangji's chest again, and… *Oh*. Now he understood; it was a device to allow a physician to clearly hear the sound of a patient's heart… and lungs, apparently, as he discovered when she shifted the location of the disc. That was…

Well. He was a disciple of Yunmeng Jiang. (Or he had been; given Jiang Cheng's temper the last time they'd spoken, who knew what his official status was at this point.) He'd done plenty of river rescues, both in response to water ghouls and after more natural hazards like floods. He'd seen what water in the lungs could do – even to cultivators, if they lacked Yunmeng Jiang's specialized breath training. And sometimes the drowned didn't have access to a healer who could monitor their lungs.

Interesting. There was a pattern emerging here – reliance on tools to assess things that a cultivator would use qi for. Tools that didn't seem to require the user to manipulate qi at all, although it was obvious that they were dependent on some kind of ward work to activate them…

Although, come to think of it, no blinky lights or beeping from the listening device!

He wondered if they were hard to make. Granted, the harder part would be convincing the traditionalists to actually *use* something that was not only new, but wouldn't showcase their cultivation skills… but in his experience, healers were usually the least traditional and the most pragmatic cultivators. The good ones, anyway.

In the meantime… a few more tests and devices, and then Wen Qing nodded to Lan Wangji before turning her attention fully to her recording device, obviously finished.

Lan Wangji had left his odd short underrobe and white overrobe folded neatly on the table. Since he was standing next to them anyway, Wei Wuxian picked up the underrobe, meaning to pass it over.

And stopped short, because *oh*.

Soft!

Not silk – although there was a sheen to it that was startlingly similar. And… not a *woven* fabric at all. When he looked closer, the fabric seemed to be made of some kind of silk-fine thread in an intricately interconnected web of knots. A web that flexed in every direction when he tugged on it experimentally, which explained how it could be worn without any folds or ties or fastenings. The fabric itself would fit to the wearer's body. Which didn't even get into the dye: a rich, soft evening blue and perfectly even across the whole of the garment.

All right, he *had* to find out more about this; if Yunmeng Jiang could funnel trade in *this* through their port, they'd be able to recover their losses from the war and rebuilding in a matter of just a year or two. Yes, Jiang Cheng would huff and grumble – he'd picked up Madam Yu's disdain for Yunmeng's close ties to trade. But he wasn't a fool, either; he knew how important those ties were.

Assuming trade was even feasible. Given how utterly disconnected these people seemed to be from *everything*, the fact that he'd never even *heard* of fabric like this when fabric was a prime trade item across the world…

Either they were very, *very* far from the sect lands – which raised disturbing questions about how *he* had gotten here – or… Well. That crazy thought about hidden enclaves of immortals secluded from the world seemed more and more plausible.

In the meantime – Lan Wangji hid it well, but those were definitely goosebumps rising on his arms. Which, fair. It was definitely a bit cold in here to be without a robe, especially if you were just standing there. Although the man didn't seem impatient? It was hard to tell with that stone face, but Wei Wuxian thought he seemed… Amused? Satisfied? Entertained? …as he watched Wei Wuxian poke at his clothes.

Well, fair. He knew how entertaining *he* found it when people gaped at Lotus Pier's dyes.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian passed the underrobe over, watching with interest as Lan Wangji pulled it over his head, the flexible fabric stretching at the neck and shoulders until the man pulled it down into position again – although it almost snagged on the neat knot of the man's hair.

A bun, but no guan – and tied at the nape of the neck, not properly atop his head. Not to mention that Lan Wangji was the only one with hair anywhere close to a proper length; even Wen Qing's hair was cut at a sharp, even line just below the height of her chin.

Which didn't exactly disprove the possibility that he'd stumbled on refugees who'd chosen to cut ties to sect and clan and get as far from the war as they could. That, and Lan Wangji's obvious unwillingness to say where he came from. Which… well. Others might look down on them for that, but he wouldn't. Not after what had happened when the war was supposed to be *done and over*.

How is Yiling doing, I wonder.

Well, nothing he could do about that at the moment, even if he could get an answer! Picking up the white robe – hemp or cotton, he thought, and very close-woven, not to mention a snowy white that was as far from mourning white as the clear water from a mountain stream was from a muddy irrigation canal, although oddly scratchy and stiff, especially compared to the underrobe; maybe the contrast was intentional for aesthetic purposes? – he passed it over to Lan Wangji as well.

And it was rather obvious what the *next* step was going to be. So while Lan Wangji shrugged the white robe on, Wei Wuxian pulled his own outer robe off and passed it to the man in turn.

Lan Wangji accepted it with… probably more respect than it really deserved; Jiang Cheng had grumbled about Wei Wuxian running about in a faded old robe for a reason, after all. Not that Wei Wuxian had particularly cared about the look of it, when the robe was soft and comfy and most importantly *warm* and easy to curl up in when he could snag a few moments for a cat-nap during the campaign. Sure, the original black dye had faded to a stormy grey – true black was finicky to dye and tended not to hold, especially in direct light when you were

running around all day. So? He saved the silk and vivid colors for the layers under the loose overrobe, where they'd be visible but protected.

Granted, after several years in the Burial Mounds, even those were looking fairly worn. He'd kept them clean and mended, but, well, time took a toll on anything. He'd even missed a hole right on the chest…

Wait.

Wei Wuxian paused, his underrobe half-unwrapped as he looked at the hole that had apparently managed to punch through both layers of his underrobes. Despite being a relatively small hole.

He knew that pattern of damage. From the choked noise Wen Qing made as she stared at his chest, she knew it as well.

Except… granted, he generally didn't bother remembering every little bruise and blow – who had the time for silly grudges like that, anyway? But you'd think he'd remember almost being shot through the heart…

Impact more than pain. The smoothed wood of the arrow shaft in his hand. And being very, very annoyed.

Something else was much angrier. And stirring. Because cleansing *didn't mean* erasing*, and the Burial Mounds would always remember what they'd been. And that meant they had Opinions.*

Wei Wuxian blinked at the sudden wave of… well, not so much memory as remembered *sensation*, devoid of context. Still. It was enough to answer one question, at least.

Someone ambushed me as I was leaving the Burial Mounds. While I was still in *the Burial Mounds.*

Someone had probably regretted that. Briefly.

Now the question was… who? And what had happened *after*?

Nie Mingjue whistled, low and impressed. "*Damn*," he said with feeling. "Is that what I think it is, Doc?"

Wen Qing pressed her lips together in a thin line, studying the small starburst scar on Wei Wuxian's chest. "If you think that's an arrow that missed his heart by *millimeters*? Then yes," she said tightly.

Not that she had much experience with arrow wounds. But she'd originally been a trauma surgeon, before losing one too many patients that she *knew* she should have been able to save had drawn her into the medical research field. She knew puncture wounds. And there were only so many ways a puncture in a location like that could have happened.

It wasn't the only scar. Which, in hindsight, shouldn't have surprised her; she *knew* that the tumultuous sixth century had been one of more or less perpetual wars. Wei Wuxian carried a sword, he would have been trained in how to *use* that sword, and going by his response to hostile situations he was perfectly familiar with other people attempting to use weapons on him in turn.

Although not all the scars appeared to be weapon-related trauma. It even looked like someone had tried to *brand* him at one point, although the burn scar itself was uneven in a way that suggested it had been either unintentional or interrupted.

But the arrow scar was what worried her the most, and not just because it was so close to his heart. The other scars were older, faded. The arrow scar was still pink, raised against the surrounding skin despite its small size. If Wei Wuxian had simply walked through the door of her clinic, she would have said that it had only just healed over.

More worrying was the small frown on Wei Wuxian's face as he lightly pressed on the scar with his fingertips. As if he didn't remember getting it in the first place.

Granted, it wasn't uncommon for people who'd experienced a traumatic injury or awakened from a coma to experience short-term amnesia blocking the circumstances of the injury or the events leading up to the coma. Given that being *frozen in ice* for *fifteen hundred years* definitely had to qualify as *both*, it probably wasn't surprising that his memory of whatever events had led to the ice would be at least temporarily confused.

Except that would mean he'd gotten the injury *immediately before* falling into the ice. For that matter, it was possible that he'd healed *in* the ice, although how that would work in light of the apparent state of stasis he'd been in… Her head hurt.

…Blast. In the chaos surrounding his waking up, no one had retrieved the last layers of ice that had still been attached to him; there was no way to check if there had been blood frozen in it as well. Which meant she had to assume that it *had* been a fresh injury, and that meant it hadn't been treated at all, not even to the standards of sixth century medicine.

Well. The good news was, it clearly *had* healed, and she didn't see any signs of infection or complications. But she would have to watch that scar carefully.

Nie Mingjue was studying Wei Wuxian's scars as well. "Well. The good news is that when you're used to problems that are actively trying to kill you… I doubt even Jin Zixun would rate as more than a blip of annoyance to him."

Wen Qing personally thought that was underestimating Jin Zixun's powers of annoyance, but then again… "And the bad news?" she asked dryly, suspecting she already knew the answer.

Nie Mingjue smirked crookedly. "It's *really* frustrating dealing with annoyances when you're used to the sort of problems you're allowed to stab back," he said—

And then stopped short, staring, as his slow walk brought him around behind Wei Wuxian. "…Or not," he said slowly. "What the *hells*."

Blinking, Wei Wuxian twisted slightly to look over his shoulder at the man, obviously puzzled by his reaction. His brow furrowed when he took in the man's stunned expression – then suddenly cleared, replaced by a rueful smile.

Oh, his expression seemed to say. *That.*

Bracing herself, Wen Qing waved for him to turn around, trying to use her expression to make it an invitation rather than a demand. With a careless shrug, he did.

Oh. No wonder Nie Mingjue was shocked. That was rather extensive scarring.

Next to her, Lan Wangji went utterly *still*. For her part… Wen Qing breathed through her nose and carefully kept her dark thoughts off her face. Getting angry would be pointless, after all – whoever the proper target of that anger would have been, they'd been dead for over a thousand years. But she did not like the implications of those layered laceration scars.

For now, however… She made a note on her tablet. "I'd like to have him do a mobility test, if we can," she noted. "Scarring that extensive can lead to long-term damage."

Lan Wangji started to step forward; Nie Mingjue waved him back. "I'll do it; I've had to do rehab after injuries enough to know the drill. You worry about words."

It took a few tries to get the idea across; understandable, given that Wei Wuxian had already puzzled out the medical exam paradigm and now they were changing it on him. But he caught on quickly, and as Wen Qing watched and took notes – and, yes, enjoyed the eye candy, she was a doctor, not *dead* – Nie Mingjue guided him through a very thorough set of stretches and flexibility tests.

Excessively thorough, actually, because about halfway through it shifted from do-as-I-do to a silly game of one-upsmanship. Which ended when Wei Wuxian huffed, did a *full backbend*, kicked himself up into a handstand, and then pushed off with his hands, flipped in midair, and landed neatly on his feet. Smirking.

Nie Mingjue made a face, then stuck his tongue out at the man. Who just laughed and stuck *his* tongue out in response.

"Boys," Wen Qing said sternly, refusing to smile. Really, how old were they supposed to be, anyway?

…Actually, how old *was* Wei Wuxian? In personal years, not his long centuries in the ice. Going by appearance alone, she would have said *not very* – twenty or so at the most. But the easy self-confidence he carried himself with was something a person generally had to grow into.

Then again, that sort of growth likely started much earlier in Wei Wuxian's time. Being settled in your status as a Real Adult was probably less of a concern when you shouldered adult responsibilities as a teenager.

Nie Mingjue at least had the grace to look chastened. Wei Wuxian *blinked* at her, all wide-eyed innocence. Wen Qing huffed and eyed him pointedly, and just got a sunny smile for her troubles because *someone* was obviously a born troublemaker.

Which was probably a good thing. Troublemakers tended to be more flexible than people who relied on the rules to dictate what to do.

"Well, it doesn't look like the scars impair his movement at all," she noted. Which was good; it meant they didn't run deep enough to have seriously damaged the muscles and tendons underneath.

"And *how*," Nie Mingjue said wryly. "Seriously, we've got to get this guy into the gym at some point."

They did, actually – if only because if she wanted to accurately assess his cardiovascular health, she should have him to a proper fitness test, not just a general health assessment. For now… settling the stethoscope earpieces back into place, she started the exam.

Heart and lungs each sounded strong and clear – good. And he'd twitched a bit when she set the cold metal resonator against his scarred back, so that area at least didn't seem to have suffered extensive nerve damage. No lesions in the throat – he even had good *teeth*, the man must have won a genetic lottery given historic dental care! Blood pressure… definitely on the low side, she'd have to watch that. Although it might be a side effect of his overall BMI. He technically wasn't *underweight*, but given how much of his mass was obviously lean muscle, she'd prefer it if he added a kilo or so.

Which made her tentatively adjust her sense of his age down slightly. She was used to baby fat disappearing with maturity, but she suspected that some of his lean look came from privation instead.

"Well, Doc?" Nie Mingjue asked as she stepped back and let the man pull his robes back on – and it was striking, seeing him fastening ties and settling folds with the same nonchalant ease that Wen Ning would have with buttons. "Is he going to live?"

She heroically did *not* roll her eyes. She'd been wondering when someone would resurrect that old joke. "Overall, he's in good health," she answered – although she was feeling just annoyed enough to direct her response at Lan Wangji, who was watching everything with his usual quiet attentiveness. "I'd prefer he put on some weight, but that's easy enough to fix." She pursed her lips slightly as silk wrapped over that arrow scar. "*Anything* to do with an MRI is absolutely verboten until we can get X-rays taken, however. This is not negotiable."

Lan Wangji tilted his head slightly. "The reason?"

"I have *no idea* if he got all of that arrow out again," she said bluntly. "Hopefully so, but I know that sometimes arrowheads were designed to break off. Given the location? If the arrowhead *is* still in there, all it might take is a tiny little *shift*."

Nie Mingjue sucked a breath through his teeth. "I've seen that, with shrapnel," he admitted. "Doesn't matter how small it is, if it puts a hole in something vital and you *can't see* it…"

Lan Wangji was unreadable as ever, but Wen Qing did not think she was imagining the sudden intensity of his stare. “Is that likely?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she told him honestly. “I hope not. But I don’t want to assume it *isn’t* and be proven wrong.”

Nie Mingjue huffed. “Well. Good news is, you’ll have plenty of support for getting those X-rays if you want them,” he said.

Wen Qing grimaced. Oh, she knew. She’d woken up that morning to a *barrage* of emails and voicemails, all of them boiling down to some variation on either “how dare you presume to dictate the terms of *my* research” and “we must do this and that and this other test *immediately there is no time to waste!*” Some managed to be both. Simultaneously, even.

In a strange way, she preferred the former. The ones who puffed and bristled? She’d dealt with touchy Old Guard types plenty. She knew how stiff they could be when reality defied their predictions. The ones who were *enthusiastic*…

They’ve at least accepted that he’s alive. But they haven’t wrapped their minds around what that means. *In their guts, he’s still a research specimen.*

Guts were a lot harder to argue with than heads. Heads listened to *logic*. Guts went “*but I don’t wanna*” and that was that.

Some of the problem was doubtless still shock. She had to remind herself that it had been less than twenty-four hours since Wei Wuxian had turned everything upside down, even if she felt like a week had passed just in the space of this morning alone. Lan Qiren had deliberately selected scholars he considered properly resistant to *romanticism*, and that unfortunately went hand in hand with a tendency to lack imagination. And with it, adaptability. It would take *time* for everything to sink in.

Which meant she needed to thread a delicate balance between giving them that time and ensuring that their inclination to keep their heads in the sand didn’t run rampant over a very lost and confused young man who had not exactly volunteered for the extremely precarious position he’d ended up in.

Speaking of. “Lan Wangji, can you ask Wei Wuxian how old he is?”

“…Mn. I will ask.”

Wen Qing listened to the conversation with half an ear as she finished typing up her notes on the tablet. It seemed like a horribly inefficient system to her – Wei Wuxian was more than sharp enough to extrapolate from a few general terms and gesture, why bother going over *every single word*?

Then again, Lan Wangji’s goal was not just communication, but helping Wei Wuxian actually *learn the language*. Seen from that perspective, his approach made sense, she supposed. After all, she’d brought the tablet for note-taking, rather than relying on a printed form, for much the same reason. Much as she would like to ease Wei Wuxian into the twenty-first

century, they might not have that much time. He *needed* to learn to navigate the world as it was now.

Finally, Lan Wangji turned back to them. “He is twenty-two by the old reckoning…”

“Meaning twenty or twenty-one by the modern count,” Wen Qing finished, adding the note to her file. Interesting; older than she might have thought by appearance, younger than she would have thought by his bearing.

“Might be why the scars don’t run so deep,” Nie Mingjue said thoughtfully. “Teenagers and twenty-year-olds tend to heal pretty fast, unlike we older and wiser types.”

“The wisdom is debatable,” Lan Wangji said, so expressionlessly that a long moment passed before Nie Mingjue’s startled bark of a laugh marked the barb striking its target.

Wen Qing snorted, then sighed. “Hopefully that’s the case,” she agreed. “Still, it’s another reason I want X-rays. He looks like he’s… Well. Like he’s been through a war.” Which made her worry about scars that couldn’t be seen. A broken bone that hadn’t set quite right might not actively impede movement, but it could still *hurt*. She was a doctor; there was no reason for a patient to be in pain if they didn’t have to.

Nie Mingjue’s cheeks puffed with a huff of air. “*Someone* definitely didn’t like him, certainly. Wonder what he did.”

“Possibly nothing,” Lan Wangji noted.

“Case of wrong place, wrong time, wrong affiliation?” Nie Mingjue nodded ruefully. “I read up a bit on the era. I can see that happening.”

“Exile might explain his presence in Yiling, as well.”

Wen Qing pursed her lips, but didn’t say anything. She had her own theory that she was not inclined to share without speaking to the man himself. Because those whip scars were layered. It had been an ongoing thing, likely over the course of *years*. Add in Wei Wuxian’s nonchalance about the scars – not shame, not embarrassment, not guilt or grief, he genuinely seemed to consider the scars unimportant…

That wasn’t punishment, political or otherwise. That was malice looking for an excuse.

However. “Enough of that,” she said briskly, tapping Lan Wangji lightly on the head with her tablet. “Focus. Your job is *not* to puzzle out Wei Wuxian’s story, Professor Lan. Your job is to help him learn what he needs in order to tell his story *himself*.”

Wei Wuxian burst out laughing at the gesture as Lan Wangji simply looked at her, stone-faced as ever.

Nie Mingjue snorted. “So how long until your baby cousin finishes the quarantine and is back with us again?”

She let the corner of her mouth quirk upward in a dry smile. “Two weeks,” she said. “We’ll just have to manage until then.”

Lan Wangji’s flat stare somehow managed to become even *more* flintily expressionless.

Wen Qing looked at him. “Lan Wangji. I do not doubt your scholarship, your skill or your dedication. But teaching someone a language *requires talking*.”

That seemed to give him pause. “I talk.”

“You need to talk *more*,” Nie Mingjue said dryly.

“More to the point, you need to change your register sometimes,” Wen Qing said wryly. “You’re very erudite, Lan Wangji, but that’s not exactly the best mode for someone who’s only learning.” She *distinctly* remembered the dictionary her little cousin had kept by his desk specifically to look up the latest obscure *chengyu* that his newfound mentor had decided to answer a question with.

Somehow, the half-second of pause before Lan Wangji tilted his head ever so slightly came off as distinctly *grumpy*. “I will endeavor to improve,” he said stiffly, as Nie Mingjue chortled again.

Clearly reading the room, Wei Wuxian reached over and patted Lan Wangji’s shoulder encouragingly, eyes dancing.

OMAKE:

LWJ: I should be a responsible scholar and bring necessary references just in case.
LWJ’s Ego: But, but, how am I supposed to flex my intellectual muscles in front of the very intelligent cute guy?

LWJ: “Fascinating, a close look at folk religion from a chaotic age!”
WWX: “Well, the people I’ve met seem okay, but given what I’ve heard through the door… best to be prepared to invoke my own chaos. Just in case.”

WWX: “Huh, someone tried to kill me.” Beat. “Sucked to be them.”

NOTES

If you’ve read my AtLA/Stargate fic *The Dragon-King’s Temple*, then you’ve probably noticed I’m handling the language barrier very differently here. Part of that is that I know very little about Chinese and even *less* about Middle Chinese (the language Wei Wuxian would speak) or Classical Chinese (the written language Lan Wangji is leaning on for communication). And unlike *Temple*, I can’t just substitute a language I do know and

handwave it as “they’re not speaking any existing language anyway.” But the other difference is the one Wen Qing notes here: this isn’t just getting by until someone can go home. There is no going back for Wei Wuxian, he’s going to have to live the rest of his life in this new language, so Lan Wangji is prioritizing actually *teaching* him the language for real. (And let’s be honest. Lan Wangji is a perfectionist and *very* ill-suited to pantomime.)

…plus, lack of pressure to work together for Dramatic Escapes, killer cold spirits, all that.

Quick note: as I understand it, when counting age by the traditional method, one is considered a year old at birth, and then two years old at the next New Year… meaning it’s possible for someone to be considered two years old by the traditional count, and one *month* old by the Western count. And the translations don’t actually indicate which system is being used, on the rare occasions we actually get a solid age for someone.

Chengyu: the four-character idioms frequently used in Chinese. Lan Wangji uses them a *lot* – which, interestingly, makes him *extremely eloquent* by Chinese cultural standards, because it means you’ve mastered the language and literature enough to pick the *exact* cultural allusion to convey what you want. But yes, also shades of “why use two simple words when one polysyllabic one will do?” Plus: eloquent he may be, but do remember that Lan Wangji is petty and *rude* as a teenager… and, honestly, not much different as an adult, he’s just much more elegant about it.

Gridded essay paper: where Western countries use lined paper, Japan and China generally use a grid layout, especially for essay writing in school. And in case you’re wondering, I’m using “lingfu” for the historical/real-world version, and talisman for the xianxia version, since unlike ofuda the term lingfu doesn’t seem to have entered fandom vocabulary yet. (Darn it. I like it when culturally specific concepts aren’t localized!)

And no, Wei Wuxian is not impressed by cheap ballpoint pens.

“The School of Principle” is the Chinese name for what Western scholars call Neo-Confucianism, which took Confucius’s ideas and revamped them into a coherent whole that became the dominant philosophy of Chinese government from pretty much 1000 CE on. And introduced a lot of the strictest ideas about the social role of women, although obviously those ideas weren’t *new*, either.

And given his history of getting hit by double-standard rules, and his canonical skill at gauging *just how* wild he can be before he actually crosses a hard line – and whether crossing those hard lines is worth it – of course Wei Wuxian is going to want to suss out what the rules are while he can still get away with “whoops, didn’t realize!” (And poke at the pretty muscles. Which is purely *aesthetic* appreciation, he assures you.)

It’s canon that Wei Wuxian is oriented towards speed and agility in his style (it comes up in the waterborne abyss fight). Which takes a lot of body awareness and control… but people who are used to thinking in game terms of strength versus agility tend to forget that stunts like that also take raw strength. Look at gymnasts!

I had so many arguments with my plot bunnies about whether or not I could have Jin Zixun as part of the project. It was a fight between “I need a troublemaker and Jin Zixun is an

excellent canon character for that" and "I cannot imagine a universe where Jin Zixun could *ever* be accomplished enough as a scientist to be accepted onto *Lan Qiren's* crack team of researchers, nope." Then I found a way to get him in anyway… and my plot bunnies decided this meant I could get away with a Sect Leader Yao expy. Sigh! (And the name I gave him means "Heroic," and yes, that is *absolutely* a shout-out to nirejseki's "Chief Cultivator Yao" fic.)

Regarding fabrics: according to some very brief research, silk-blended textiles only go back about six hundred years – long after Wei Wuxian's era as I've set it for this fic! Likewise, the oldest knitted items found seem to be from Egypt after the turn of the first millennium. And yes – combined with light armor, at least, a silk shirt does, in fact, significantly reduce the lethality of arrows! Don't try it at home, though…

Technically, there should probably be Lichtenberg-patterned burns on the whip scars. But given that Wei Wuxian gets hit multiple times *across the torso* and doesn't suffer any sort of heart attack? For the purposes of this fic, I'm leaning towards either the electrical aspect of Zidian being purely cosmetic, or Madam Yu suppressed that aspect. So no lightning burns. (Although there's an interesting plot bunny to explore there about Zidian's never-actually-demonstrated exorcism effect being a side effect of *electrocution*…)

If you pay attention, Wei Wuxian will absolutely push himself right to the edge of his limits, bust through said limits, and *keep going*… when he has to. But when the situation isn't urgent, he's happy to relax and take his time; he goofs off, he plays with A'Yuan, he tries new foods and teases Lan Wangji. He can summon *intense* focus when needed, and when not needed he doesn't bother. (One of multiple reasons why I can't buy the popular "ADHD!WWX" fanon. In the novel, at least, he shows no sign of hyperfocus *or* being easily distracted. The one place he *does* appear to display a short attention span, he's either, A, dealing with a teacher whose only lecture method is The Drone and is *actively hostile*, or B, copying a ridiculous number of lines a ridiculous number of times (Nie Huaisang comments on it!) under enforced-by-magic absolute silence. …And note that he *remembers* the information from the lectures quite well. And the books he read while Not Copying.)

In fact, one of the funny things about Wei Wuxian's "bad memory" is that despite the claims of everyone in the novel, Wei Wuxian included, my impression is that he doesn't actually have a bad memory at all. In fact, considering that he was able to ID the Thousand Holes curse and recall its details simply because he'd stumbled across a reference to it while *idly browsing the Cloud Recesses library as a bored fifteen year old*, I'd say the evidence suggests that his regular memory is actually quite good. Not to mention that apparently he can play Lan Wangji's song *perfectly* from memory despite having no conscious recollection of hearing it – Lan Wangji confirms that he doesn't misremember music.

The thing is, when he forgets people and events, there's generally a good reason. Often, what he's forgetting just wasn't memorable in the first place, especially in the context of other things happening at the same time. For example: not recognizing Wen Ning after the fall of Lotus Pier? They met briefly, in passing, at a major sect event. It was Just Another Tuesday for Wei Wuxian. And he's under *intense* stress when they meet again. Mianmian? I suspect the whole *Xuanwu of Slaughter* thing kind of wiped out the details of what came before… not to mention that she likely looks rather different after sixteen years. Same with not

remembering that he carried Lan Wangji piggyback. Given that at the time he was trying to get them away from a *monster out of legends*, I think it says more that Lan Wangji *does* remember that detail than that Wei Wuxian doesn't…

As for Jin Zixun? The novel explicitly points out that he doesn't recognize the guy on Phoenix Mountain because *they'd never met*. (Something CQL changes, if I understand correctly.) Not remembering him at Qionqi Pass? Again, see *bigger things to worry about*. And the novel does establish that he does, in fact, remember Jin Zixun after that point.

In some cases, his loss of memory seems to be the result of *trauma*, physical or emotional. The aftermath of the Xuanwu fight and the events after Nightless City? High fever and catatonia are altered states of consciousness that *impair memory formation*. Of course he doesn't remember those! Then you have him forgetting, until they are heading into the Second Siege, that A'Yuan *existed*. Which is the interesting part. Because if he didn't remember a child he helped raise and cared about a great deal for at least a year, and possibly several years? That's not a bad memory, that's either active repression or *damage*. Either of which makes sense. Active repression because *his adopted kid is dead*, or damage from being dead himself. None of which is a *bad memory*.

In fact, he flat-out says it: forgetting is a *deliberate choice* on his part, because he chooses not to focus on things he does for others, or bad things done to him. It's not a bad memory, it's a decision he's made about how he wants to live.

Finally… When I was rereading the novel, I ran into something that made me do a mental double-take:

Cloud Recesses was not attacked by the Wen. Or at least, that's not what we're told about what happened.

Here's what we know:

> *One of the disciples beside them whispered, "Of course his face isn't so great. Last month, the Cloud Recesses was burnt down. You didn't know yet, did you?"*
>
> *Hearing this, Wei Wuxian jolted, "Burnt down?!"*
>
> *In the past few days, Jiang Cheng had heard too many of these stories, so he wasn't as surprised as Wei Wuxian was, "By the Wen Sect's people?"*
>
> *The disciple, "You can say that. You can also say… that the Lan Sect itself burnt everything down. The eldest son of the Wen Sect, Wen Xu, went to Gusu. He accused the Lan Sect's leader of something and forced the Lan Sect's people to burn down their own residence! It was given pretty names like cleaning up the place so that it's reborn from the firelight. Most of the Cloud Recesses and its surrounding forest has been burnt down. Just like that, the hundreds of years old paradise had been destroyed. The leader of the Lan Sect was heavily injured. We don't even know if he's still alive. Well, well…"*
>
> *Wei Wuxian, "Is Lan Zhan's leg related to this?"*

> *The disciple, "Of course. The first place that Wen Xu ordered them to burn down was the Library Pavilion. He declared that he'll teach anyone who wasn't willing to do it a lesson. Lan Wangji refused. He was attacked by Wen Xu's people and they broke one of his legs. It hadn't even been healed yet, and he was dragged out here again. Who knows what they're trying to do?!"* (Chapter 52, ExR translation)

From the sound of it, what the Wens did at Cloud Recesses is similar to the start of what happened at Lotus Pier. My read is that, as Wang Liangjiao did at Lotus Pier, Wen Xu simply walked in the front doors, accused the Lan of wronging them, and demanded that the Lan burn Cloud Recesses themselves… *and they did so*. With only Lan Wangji speaking out in protest at the burning of the library, and getting his leg broken as a result. How exactly his father's injuries came about is never explained. (Part of me wonders if what happened is that Lan Wangji's father refused to come out of seclusion on Wen Xu's demand… and therefore didn't know what was going on until his house started burning and he couldn't get out in time.)

But "the Wen burned the Cloud Recesses and then walked away" makes sense of Lan Wangji's own situation in the indoctrination – he arrives with a group of Lan disciples, same as everyone else; he's not being dragged up out of the dungeons or anything else one might expect from the captured heir of a defeated clan. Which helps explain why the sects were still desperately pretending that war wasn't on the horizon.

It also helps explain why Lan Wangji has so much trouble grasping how the destruction of Lotus Pier affected Wei Wuxian. There was no massacre at Cloud Recesses, while Wei Wuxian stared at the bodies of the people he grew up with thrown on a pile, trying to figure out if the body on top was the *youngest shidi* he'd been playing shoot-the-kite with that morning. The Lan's home burned, but they weren't driven out; nearly everyone Wei Wuxian knew was killed.

Chapter 5: Making a Point

Chapter Summary

In which Wei Wuxian reminds everyone that he doesn't have to be well-behaved.

Chapter Notes

Warning: some of Lan Xichen's canon character flaws manifest rather starkly in the next two chapters, and he does get called out on it. It's not intended to be bashing – I try to avoid that! But given his canonical behavior, this is how I see things playing out in the situation laid out in this story. If you're interested in how I came to that characterization… well, this chapter definitely earns the Ridiculously Long Notes tag.

There were times when Wen Qing wished her sense of ethics were not quite so *insistent*.

Not often – if only because she knew where they'd come from. Wen Ning was sweet and shy and honestly a bit of a mouse, but he *cared* so much about doing the right thing, even when it was hard. Even when he was terrified. Even when it meant getting beaten up or – worse, in his mind – yelled at. How could she call herself his big sister and not honor that soul-deep drive to look the unfairness and callous indifference of the world in the eye and *do* something about it?

Granted, if she was going to be completely honest with herself, it wasn't just Wen Ning's influence. She'd chosen to be a doctor for a reason.

Still. She couldn't help but think more malleable ethics would definitely be better for her blood pressure.

"Doctor Wen, surely you must see that they have a point," Lan Xichen said soothingly.

Then again, it wasn't *ethics* that had her wanting to snarl like an angry tiger. She was a woman in a male-dominated field, after all. She'd had *quite* her fair share of being told that she *must* see this and *must* understand that.

Always with the same loaded implication lurking under the oh-so accommodating words: *I am being Logical and you are not, and so I am Gently Admonishing you and you will admit that of course I am right*.

Not that Lan Xichen was *conscious* of that, any more than the many colleagues she'd dealt with who were convinced that gentle guidance – rather than *listening to her* – was all that was needed.

She met his eyes levelly. "Professor Lan, the quarantine is a matter of medical necessity. Wei Wuxian's health and safety *must* come first."

On the screen, Lan Xichen raised his hands. "Doctor Wen, you are of course the authority on that topic; I'm not disputing the importance of the quarantine," he said placatingly.

And now for the "but." Wen Qing kept her face calm and her expression unimpressed, and braced herself.

"But the Yiling Laozu project is meant to be a team effort. One can hardly call it collaboration when only you and Lan Wangji have access to the research subject."

"I've made the requirements for access clear. And were it an option, we would not have access either," she replied, keeping her tone polite but unyielding. And trying not to let on how that phrasing – *access* and *research subject* – bothered her. "As it stands, Wei Wuxian had already been exposed to us, making this the path of least harm, given that total isolation would be both inhumane and impractical. As it is, only your brother is in regular contact, and he is *strictly* maintaining quarantine."

Nie Mingjue *couldn't* maintain quarantine standards, not when he had to do his job as head of security. Especially given that the protests at the front gates had yet to simmer down – might actually be escalating – and he was still trying to track down the source of Su Minshan's contraband bullets. For her part… Wen Qing was doing her best to maintain her own quarantine within the limits of the project team, but that did mean exposure to people who technically had not completed the required isolation period, so she was trying to keep her contact minimal.

And that didn't even get into the issue of the ones who thought quarantine should only apply to other people. Most of whom had given up on browbeating her in favor of a more sympathetic audience.

And three, two, one…

"Still. Don't you think these standards are a little… unnecessarily strict?" Lan Xichen asked, frowning slightly. "Maintaining full isolation is asking quite a lot, especially for the visiting researchers."

Wen Qing did not snort, much as she would have liked to. Because she could *hear* Professor Yao's incessant whining lurking behind that particular argument.

"The visiting researchers should be having an easier time of it than those of us who live off-campus," she said dryly. "Professor Lan, you cannot have a *partial* quarantine. It renders the entire effort pointless."

Well. Not entirely true. As with many things, quarantine was at its heart a system of risk management, which meant there were always decisions to be made about what was and wasn't *acceptable risk*.

Having done some research on what even common, everyday colds could do to someone whose immune system wasn't prepared for them? Wen Qing had no intentions of easing up on anything. Especially for the complaints of entitled idiots who thought rules only applied to people who weren't *them*.

Unfortunately, Lan Xichen was a peacemaker. Had, in fact, built much of his career – and, she suspected, his self-identity – around being the calm, reasonable party who could build consensus, or at least acceptable compromises, in the constant clash of stubborn personalities that was academia. Which made him an excellent manager… when the primary issue was balancing equally weighted schedules and priorities in a high-profile, high-prestige project that required the collaboration of multiple very big egos.

Except that what this situation demanded was not compromise, but someone willing to draw a line in the sand and stand by it, based on what was *right* rather than the will of the majority. Or more accurately, the will of the most obnoxious.

It wasn't that she didn't understand his conundrum. Lan Xichen wasn't willing to be the bad guy telling people they couldn't have what they wanted; when one person said no to many, somehow it was always the *one* who was considered unreasonable and unjustified, even when that was patently not the case. And she did recognize the importance of ensuring that even the most unreasonable parties at least *felt* that they were being heard.

Except that for many of them, *feel like they're being heard* only happened when they got what they wanted. Which meant that Lan Xichen's reflex to compromise, in this case, translated to refusing to stand up for the one person in this mess who *could not* advocate for himself.

Which meant it was Wen Qing's job to draw the line. Which she could and would. She was a doctor: telling people what they needed to hear rather than what they *wanted* to hear was hardly an unfamiliar role for her.

"If they truly feel that they cannot maintain the necessary standards for the quarantine," or more accurately, didn't *want* to, "then they must wait until I have administered the most important vaccinations and am more confident of the man's health," she said bluntly.

Because it wasn't only the vaccinations that were important; Wei Wuxian also had to be able to *tell her* if something was wrong. There were reasons why veterinarians actually had stricter training in some ways than many physicians, and why pediatricians had their own unique specialization. So much of medicine required the patient's input and feedback; working with a patient who *couldn't* communicate was dangerous.

Lan Xichen shook his head wearily. "Doctor Wen, according to the projected timeline you sent me, that could take months," he said. "Many of them have donors who will not be happy if they have not received an interim progress report in that time."

As if Lan Qiren hadn't already planned on withholding publications for a while to ensure research wouldn't be disrupted during its most delicate phase. She'd read the paperwork she'd signed to participate in the project. "The donors, not to mention the *rest of the world*, including the entire global academic community, will be a lot *less* happy if our living miracle gets sick and *dies* because we were impatient," she countered, a little more sharply than was probably politic.

Hiding a deep sigh, she leaned forward, lacing her fingers together on the desk in front of her – not that Lan Xichen would see it from his camera angle, but the body language would still communicate to him in a thousand subtle ways. "Manager Lan, Wei Wuxian's health and safety must come first. He did not volunteer to be involved in any of this, and in the current circumstances he is extremely vulnerable. I'm sorry that the project schedule has been disrupted so thoroughly, but the fact remains: access to Wei Wuxian is a privilege that must be *earned*. Not a right."

Lan Xichen raised an eyebrow at her. "A privilege granted to a boy still in secondary school, but not the distinguished scholars who have been part of the project from the beginning?"

Hah. She'd wondered when that would come up. "Your uncle cleared Wen Yuan's participation because Lan Wangji desperately needs an assistant, and the boy was already involved." She arched an eyebrow back. "And in case it slipped your notice, Wen Yuan does *not* currently have access to Wei Wuxian. He is following the exact same protocols I am requiring of every other member of the project."

In fact, A'Yuan was following every single rule and protocol, and then some. He'd arranged for his friend at the library to drop off any groceries and other purchases at his door. He'd even personally negotiated with Lan Qiren to add a line item in the budget to officially fund Mo Xuanyu's position in the library as a digitization assistant to ensure that Wen Yuan could get scans of all necessary references, rather than needing to go to the library in person.

And if that meant that the steady income *also* allowed Mo Xuanyu to stay on campus rather than returning to his aunt's household… Well, that was between A'Yuan, his squad of schoolboy co-conspirators, Wen Ning, and the walls.

Lan Xichen chuckled. "That's very true," he agreed. "He's quite dedicated." Sighing, he shook his head. "Well, I'll speak to the others. I'm sure we can work something out."

What is there to work out about honor the quarantine*?* The question was hovering at the tip of her tongue, but Lan Xichen ended the call before she could ask it. Sighing, she closed her laptop.

And then indulged herself for a minute, slumping forward to rest her head on the smooth, cool casing. "Arrrgh…"

Right. Deep breaths.

The good news was that, despite what it *felt* like sometimes, most of the project team *were* following the recommended protocols. It helped that many of them had planned from the beginning for their participation in the project to be intensive and relatively long-term; it

didn't take a great deal of additional effort to arrange their obligations so that they could effectively remain in the required isolation. Two who had families in the area and weren't willing to isolate from them had even volunteered to act as support for supplies and research, although many people were also making use of the same arrangements Wen Yuan was using.

The *bad* news was that the smaller cadre who thought that the rules shouldn't apply to them were loud, obnoxious, insistent, and disinclined to listen to anyone except each other. Which meant that *they* were the ones Lan Xichen was trying to placate. Except that every concession he tried to offer would only be met with a push for more… and at the same time, infuriate the ones who *were* following protocols, who would start clamoring for concessions of their own in a feedback loop of spite and posturing over status and power.

It didn't help that there was no guidance forthcoming from Lan Qiren. Wen Qing had tried to push the man into at least calling for revised research plans, to give the project team something to *do* and get them thinking about how their approach would have to change. But Lan Qiren was stubbornly continuing to approach the situation as if the whole business was nothing more than an inconvenient pause in the project schedule, rather than a fundamental change in the very foundations of the project. And Wen Qing had yet to find a hammer big enough to make the stubborn old goat *listen* to what he so obviously did not want to hear.

Wen Qing pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

Well. At least one person very much *was* listening, and quite intently. From what Lan Wangji told her, over the past week Wei Wuxian had already picked up enough modern Mandarin to actually hold something resembling a conversation. A very slow, very awkward, very *stilted* conversation, so long as sentences didn't get too long or complex, and his vocabulary was still painfully limited simply by lack of exposure – but actual *communication* all the same.

Given that he had *no* shared base of reference and it had only been a week? That was amazing progress. Especially given that his sole teacher was a man who had raised *succinct* to a way of life.

It also meant that yesterday, after extensive research and careful work, Lan Wangji had managed to sit down and at least communicate the basic idea of quarantine to the man.

Well. To be fair, Wei Wuxian probably understood the concept and *importance* of quarantine far better than anyone who'd grown up in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with vaccines and antibiotics and modern medicine in all its glorious manifestations. *He'd* grown up in a time when plague was a matter of *when and which*, not *if*, and all too often the only available defense was to keep one's distance.

Unfortunately, that same research had revealed that Wen Qing's vaguely remembered trivia tidbit wasn't entirely accurate. There were references to smallpox variolation being used as early as the Zhou Dynasty, but the references themselves only appeared in much later texts, making her suspect that they were an attempt to manufacture antiquity in a time when the ancients were considered the source of all worthwhile knowledge. The first actual *documentation* appeared in the 1500s – far, far too late for Wei Wuxian to know anything about them.

Unless the rumors of such inoculations being a secret Daoist magical practice from the turn of the first millennium that had somehow been kept utterly secret while surviving any number of political and religious purges for *five hundred years* were not only true, but actually stretched back an *additional* five hundred years, *and* Wei Wuxian had somehow *just happened* to be one of the rare few to know about this impossibly iron-clad secret.

Frankly, "actually a cultivator with superhuman powers achieved through lots of meditation" was almost more plausible.

Which meant that they'd be starting from scratch when it came to explaining vaccines, and "I need to do something that will make you miserable now to reduce the chance that you'll *die* later" definitely fell under the category of things she wanted to be able to explain first. Her best guess was that it would be at least two more weeks before they even *started* the vaccination regimen she'd sketched out, given that she would also have to check for allergies and ideally get *some* kind of medical history established first.

And the whining is bad enough now. *It's only been a week.*

Well. The fact of the matter was, nothing was going to happen until they'd cleared away some of the language barrier, and that, bluntly put, was out of her control and in the capable hands of Lan Wangji. So while he handled arming Wei Wuxian with the tools he needed to survive twenty-first century academic politics, *she* would use her clout as a physician to draw the line in the sand that Lan Qiren wouldn't and Lan Xichen couldn't.

…which meant it was time to open her computer and tackle the latest round of "obviously *I* should be exempt from this nonsense you're demanding." Argh.

If Lan Qiren tried to complain about her billing a bottle of painkillers to the project, she might very well strangle the man.

Settling the strap of his bulkier-than-usual pack more firmly over his shoulder, Lan Wangji started up the stairs.

Over the past few weeks, his days had taken on a certain rhythm. Mornings were typically spent on his usual routine, followed by a review of the previous day's notes and checking in with Wen Yuan on the results of his own research and any resulting suggestions for vocabulary, conversation topics, and possible sources of misunderstandings.

After that, he joined Wei Wuxian in the lab at 8:30 AM – a time he was careful to strictly adhere to. Even with a clock, it was difficult to maintain any kind of consistent time sense locked in a lab with no windows and bright, utterly unchanging artificial lights. Even Lan Wangji found himself struggling to maintain his sense of time in the lab, and he was both accustomed to using clocks *and* able to leave and reorient himself.

So it was little surprise that Wei Wuxian tended to be a little groggy and disoriented when Lan Wangji first arrived – particularly given that the man apparently was still only sleeping in brief cat-naps, even though they'd found some black-out tape to muffle the worst of the

equipment lights. Although Wei Wuxian had also teased Lan Wangji about looking so put together so early in the morning, so it was possible that the man was simply a night owl.

Which was intriguing in its own right. He was accustomed to associating late nights with parties and drinking and a disregard for proper schedules… but that was an association driven by the industrial revolution and easy access to cheap, bright, steady lights. In an era when artificial light was limited to candles and lanterns, expensive and limited in output… outside of special events and duties like night watches, nights would be *quiet*, simply because the vast majority of people would go to bed with the sun by sheer necessity. Or at least, so he'd always assumed. So what had Wei Wuxian done during the night hours?

Regardless of the hour, however, he always greeted Lan Wangji's arrival with an enthusiasm that under any other circumstances Lan Wangji would have found rather gratifying. Except that he was painfully aware that for the most part, he was Wei Wuxian's sole source of human contact. Which was the other reason, besides an attempt to give something resembling structure to the timeless monotony of the lab, why he'd taken to spending the entirety of his day with the man.

Although to be honest, spending time with Wei Wuxian was… not a hardship. After the man's calm acceptance of Wen Qing's electronic tablet, Lan Wangji had taken to bringing his own laptop to the lab with him. When one or both of them needed a break from the language lessons, he would take the time to type up his own notes and send them off to Wen Yuan, while Wei Wuxian entertained himself with drawing or music or meditation. Once, he'd even dozed off – understandably, since apparently the evening before Jin Zixun had shown up drunk in the dead of night to demand entrance. Lan Wangji did not blame Wei Wuxian in the least for spending the rest of that night with one eye open.

That stunt that *should* have gotten the idiot thrown out of the project and preferably off campus entirely, to Lan Wangji's mind. Unfortunately, Professor Yao's refusal to castigate his student, and the problem of keeping the events in the project quiet for the time being, had tied Nie Mingjue's hands on the matter. Something that Lan Wangji believed the security chief would be bringing up with Lan Qiren during their meeting today.

Had anyone described this new routine to Lan Wangji, he would have expected to find it… *trying*, to say the least. Especially given that Wei Wuxian's curiosity meant that it was never long before the man was looking over his shoulder, trying to puzzle out what he was doing.

At first, it had certainly been deeply awkward to write notes about a man who was watching him write them, even if – or perhaps *because* – he couldn't actually read anything beyond a few characters here and there, and of course his own name. But half the time, it simply launched them into a new lesson. He'd even started showing Wei Wuxian the basics of typing.

It should have been aggravating. Or at least exhausting. Lan Wangji knew his capacity for dealing with people very well, and it was… emphatically not limitless.

But to his surprise, he found his time in the lab… oddly enjoyable. Wei Wuxian was quick-minded, lively, and good-natured, and Lan Wangji found that despite the distraction, his work during those breaks was perfectly productive. It was no hardship at all to spend the entire day

with the man, although he would have much preferred different surroundings. The stifling monotony of the lab left even *him* feeling under-stimulated. He'd never been the sort to play music as he worked, believing it a needless distraction. He was reconsidering that philosophy.

Granted, the context where he *truly* needed stimulation was the now-mandatory afternoon progress report meeting. And he wasn't even in the lab for those. Like Wen Qing, he only joined the calls virtually, in order to maintain the physical seclusion needed to uphold the quarantine, but while Wei Wuxian had thus far handled the technology he'd encountered with aplomb (and fascination), Lan Wangji was disinclined to inflict the *joys* of video calls on him just yet.

Especially when the content of those calls had thus far been endless repetitions of, no, one week was *not* long enough to achieve fluency in even everyday conversations, let alone the level required for conducting in-depth interviews on the minutiae of dietary culture, not to mention the level of acculturation that would be needed to understand the *purpose* of such questions – and no, he would *not* go through a thirty-page *single spaced* list of questions that ranged from inane to *deeply invasive* to bluntly inappropriate with Wei Wuxian tomorrow, although Professor Yue was invited to submit his list to Lan Wangji's assistant for an initial review; no, Lan Wangji would not be conducting the review himself, unless Professor Liu would like him to delay the project further by turning his attention away from the language situation?

Intellectually, Lan Wangji understood his brother's aim in requiring the daily meetings. With the initial research schedule that had been so painstakingly laid out now rendered defunct and Wen Qing stonewalling attempts to circumvent the quarantine, these daily meetings served to keep the rest of the project team engaged and actively involved in the project and avoided the unrest that the information void of radio silence would inevitably invite.

Emotionally… Well. Wen Yuan had suggested, in jest, that a requirement for speaking in the meetings be that participants attempt to learn Russian… with a non-bilingual native speaker for a teacher and using only educational materials written in that language. Lan Wangji was extremely tempted to pass the suggestion on, *not at all* in jest.

Because they had made progress in the past week. *Enormous* progress.

For which the credit definitely fell to the student and not the teacher. Wei Wuxian had no qualms at all about filling in the vast majority of their conversations by chattering away in his limited modern Mandarin, blithely mixed with Middle Chinese as he felt his way through the latest words and grammar they'd covered and undeterred by Lan Wangji's relative silence and occasional corrections.

Not to mention that Wei Wuxian tended to greet him every morning with his own list of questions to be answered. Usually more questions than they could possibly get to in a day, given that each one tended to involve a slow process of Lan Wangji verifying that he understood the question, answering to the best of his ability, and then ensuring that Wei Wuxian understood the answer – along with all the necessary pauses to go over every new word and twist of grammar that came up in the process. Especially when new questions often came up in the process, because half or more of Wei Wuxian's questions couldn't be answered without first explaining something else entirely. Many of them things that Lan

Wangji didn't understand completely himself, because Wei Wuxian, he was coming to discover, was relentlessly curious about anything and *everything*.

Which was the other reason Lan Wangji had taken to bringing his laptop to the lab. He spent a somewhat embarrassing amount of time just looking things up. Some of them things he might have expected – plumbing, for example. Others… less so. A few days ago he'd had to look up technical information on *knitting*, because Wei Wuxian was trying to understand how the fabric of his shirt could be so flexible. Even more embarrassing, *Wei Wuxian* had understood the explanatory illustrations far better than he had. By the end of *that* interesting tangent, their roles had reversed as Wei Wuxian tried to explain how the process worked to *him*.

At least it had been good language practice.

To be honest, Lan Wangji kept expecting himself to get impatient or irritated. But watching the way Wei Wuxian was taking the scattered bits and pieces of information and piecing them together into a complex whole that he easily shifted and modified with each new insight was *fascinating*. Well worth the occasional embarrassment of looking up guides designed for schoolchildren to explain aspects of everyday life that it had never occurred to him to even think about. Wei Wuxian was simply too openly, honestly *interested*; his enthusiasm was infectious.

Although he strongly suspected that Wei Wuxian's past teachers had either loved him or despised him, with little middle ground between.

At the same time, Lan Wangji couldn't help noticing that certain questions were conspicuous in their absence. Questions like *who are you people?* Questions like *where am I, how did I get here, why am I here?*

Questions like *when can I go home?*

He suspected he knew why, as well. He remembered how Wei Wuxian had reacted to Lan Wangji's own hesitation when Wei Wuxian had asked about affiliations that first evening, the way he'd finally waved the question off without demanding an answer.

On the one hand, Lan Wangji could not deny that he felt a guilty relief at the man's willingness to not press the question even though he surely had to be wondering. What had happened to Wei Wuxian… it was an important conversation and one that *had* to happen, sooner rather than later.

He just wasn't ready quite yet. For all Wei Wuxian's enthusiasm, conversation was still stilted and awkward, clumsy and limited at best. Not the way that Lan Wangji wanted to give such shattering news to anyone.

He also suspected that Wei Wuxian's willingness to wait likely had far less to do with patience than with the realization that Wei Wuxian couldn't risk alienating Lan Wangji at the moment. He was very aware that Wei Wuxian's current isolation meant that Lan Wangji currently held an undue and frankly disturbing level of influence over the man. It was one of

several reasons why he was counting the days until Wen Yuan completed his required period of isolation and could join them again.

The other reason was… irksome as it was, Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue had been partially right when they'd teased Lan Wangji about needing to talk more. Learning a language required a conversation partner, and more importantly, more than one. Mastery of a language required practice. Conversation. *Experience*.

And Wei Wuxian was going to need mastery. Not only would he have to live the rest of his life in the modern world, but if he wanted people to *listen* to him, as opposed to treating him as a living historical archive, then he had to be able to speak for himself.

Which was why the bag Lan Wangji had brought to the lab today was significantly bulkier than the norm – enough so that Meng Yao raised his eyebrows when he saw Lan Wangji walking down the hallway. Because one of the lessons Lan Wangji had learned as a scholar was that being listened to took more than words.

Wei Wuxian practically *bounced* as Lan Wangji entered the lab. "Good morning!" he said, grinning, and blinked at the bulging bag with shameless interest. "What's that?"

Lan Wangji huffed, amused by the mischievous slant to the man's smile. *What's that* was one of the first phrases Wei Wuxian had learned – had *insisted* on learning, in fact. It was one he had most definitely mastered. And he used it with a relish that said he was well aware that he sounded like a small child on his first real outing – and that he found this fact hilarious.

Rather than answer directly, Lan Wangji wordlessly set the bag on the thawing table, opening it as Wei Wuxian watched over his shoulder with bouncing impatience… and carefully did not smirk at the startled squeak the man made at the deep, almost shimmering red fabric Lan Wangji revealed.

Lan Wangji tried not to feel too smug at Wei Wuxian's wide-eyed expression as he pulled the turtleneck out. After all, he could hardly claim full credit for the outcome of this side project. He may have been the one to initially suggest it, but Nie Mingjue had been the one to advise on an appropriate cut for someone who expected to be physically active – and Wen Qing who had pointed out that a fit that a modern person would consider appropriately snug, even relaxed, would likely feel uncomfortably, even *dangerously* restricting to a man who had lived before the introduction of elastic fibers and stretchy fabrics changed what was *possible* to do with clothing.

Not to mention that they already knew Wei Wuxian was all too familiar with physical violence, and might very well react badly to anything that put even slight pressure on his throat.

And then it was A'Yuan who had searched until he found a designer who made a shirt matching the design they needed, using the same silk-cashmere blend as the shirt Lan Wangji had worn that Wei Wuxian had admired so much, but dyed a deep, rich carmine red that almost perfectly matched Wei Wuxian's hair ribbon and the trim on his underrobe, as well as the relatively faded embroidery on his overrobe.

Which still didn't make it any less satisfying when Wei Wuxian actually *flailed* a little, hands waving in the air as he briefly abandoned his efforts at modern Mandarin to babble something in Middle Chinese, far too fast for Lan Wangji to even attempt to pick out what tiny bit of that language he had managed to pick up – although having come to know the man, he suspected it was something along the lines of *you're supposed to warn a person before you give them nice things!*

Amused, he simply continued to hold the shirt out until Wei Wuxian finally reached out to accept it, and carefully did not laugh at the way the man's face lit up as he registered how *soft* it was. As he watched, Wei Wuxian turned the shirt over in his hands, obviously feeling out the way the fabric draped and folded in his fingers, before finally shaking it out to actually look at it.

After a few tries, he managed to find the correct grip for the shirt to reveal its shape. Lan Wangji nodded slightly at the startled look Wei Wuxian gave him as the man realized what he was holding, and held up the second item from the bag in response.

This one – a long jacket in charcoal grey edged with a night-black trim – had been harder to source than the shirt, mostly because they'd been trying to find something that matched the layer of robes that Wei Wuxian wore underneath the loose, untied and rather worn overrobe that served as his outermost layer. It was a tougher material than the turtleneck, with a matte effect to offset the sheen of the red, although still made of silk. Hopefully it would be lightweight enough – and the overly-aggressive air conditioning in the lab cool enough – that layering it over the shirt would still be comfortable; based on Wei Wuxian's own clothing, his reactions to their own dress, and what Lan Wangji knew of clothing styles of the early centuries of the common era, it was likely that Wei Wuxian would feel uncomfortably underdressed in only the shirt. It was designed to be paired with a belt, but would go equally well with the *dai* and sash from Wei Wuxian's own clothes. Even the sword belt – although including *that* would definitely push the impression from "modern" to "urban fantasy character."

Wen Yuan's friend from the library had actually been the one to direct them to a source for the jacket; apparently he was a fan of xianxia cosplay and had known of some designers who specifically made clothing intended to evoke the *aesthetic* of traditional clothing while still fitting very much into modern fashions.

Clothing that was emphatically *not cheap*, any more than the silk-cashmere turtleneck had been. Which, as Wen Qing had grimly noted, was half the point.

"Fashion isn't just about self-expression and keeping the weather off. It's a kind of social armor," she'd explained. *"Women tend to be more aware of it than men, but it still applies. Dress Wei Wuxian like he's rich, like he's someone* important*, and people will be more likely to treat him like it."*

Which was also one of the reasons why Lan Wangji had deliberately looked for something that would *evoke* the aesthetic and hopefully the feel of Wei Wuxian's robes, rather than seeking out traditional hanfu. Leaving aside the problem that "traditional" still spanned fifteen hundred years of sartorial evolution after Wei Wuxian's time, the *other* half of the point of the new clothes was to dress him in *modern clothes*, so that even a glance would

reinforce that he was a living man existing *in the present*, not just a living relic of the ancient world.

They *had* at least provided Wei Wuxian with some clothing already – mostly spares from Lan Wangji's own closet, since it was difficult to easily acquire clothing sized for someone as tall as Wei Wuxian, let alone the muscled shoulders and tapered waist. But thus far, Lan Wangji had only offered loose shirts and pants that could substitute for underlayers beneath the robes; he did not want to unintentionally pressure Wei Wuxian into wearing clothing he found uncomfortable, given that the modesty standards of the modern world were quite different from those of the sixth century, and it was likely that the fabric felt flimsy and insufficient. Not to mention that, outside of his workout clothes – decidedly *not* appropriate for lending! – none of Lan Wangji's clothing was really designed to allow for the freedom of movement that Wei Wuxian was so clearly accustomed to.

It was possible that the new clothes were… a touch excessive. Lan Wangji's uncle had certainly thought so, when they explained the project. But Lan Wangji knew that it would be important, when the time came for Wei Wuxian to deal with the project researchers, that he appear properly dressed, in clothing that reflected his importance – not second-hand items borrowed from someone's closet.

Granted, no one was actually interacting with Wei Wuxian yet, outside of Lan Wangji and Wen Qing, and he thought – hoped – that neither of them were in need of such a reminder. But hopefully that meant that Wei Wuxian would have the time to become accustomed and comfortable with the quirks of modern fabrics and designs, before he had to interact with more people – or one of the researchers got the bright idea of demanding to interview him over WeChat.

To be honest, he was a little surprised no one had tried that yet. One area where the unexamined assumptions about Wei Wuxian's level of agency worked in their favor, he supposed.

He *had* gone relatively traditional with the trousers, since they were partially covered by the long jacket. Let Wei Wuxian have some time to get accustomed to modern fabrics and styles before they tried to tackle snaps and zippers, let alone denim and pressed slacks.

Not to mention…

Peering into the bag, Wei Wuxian blinked, pulling out plain white cotton. "What's this?" he asked, in the exact same tone of bright, earnest curiosity that he used asking about *every* modern oddity he'd encountered.

Right. This part. Lan Wangji drew in a breath, bracing himself. He *could* do this. It was hardly anything shameful, just a normal part of everyday attire that *everyone* wore…

…Nope. The words would not come out. He waved a hand in the vicinity of his own hips, feeling his traitor ears going red hot. And prayed. Technically speaking, in ancient times the trousers *themselves* were the underclothes. But Wei Wuxian was both intelligent and adaptable. Hopefully the general shape, plus – awkward as it was – Lan Wangji's own

embarrassment, especially in comparison to when he'd taken off his shirt for Wen Qing, would maybe be enough…?

Apparently the heavens were smiling on him. After a moment's puzzled look, Wei Wuxian's eyes suddenly widened, mouth shaping a silent "Ah!" of understanding – followed by a wry laugh as the man set the briefs down next to the other clothes now sitting folded on the table. Still smiling, he turned back to Lan Wangji. "Thank you!" he said brightly, grin widening slightly in a way that suggested he had absolutely noticed those tell-tale ears.

Although, there was something slightly conflicted in the glance he cast at the pile of new clothing. Which Lan Wangji thought was perfectly understandable. He and Wen Yuan had demonstrated the use of the sink that first evening, and after Lan Wangji had belatedly supplied the man with a hand towel, he knew that Wei Wuxian had been making an effort to wipe himself down as regularly and thoroughly as he could. But the man was obviously and understandably reluctant to disrobe enough for a proper sponge bath, likely wary of the possibility that he was being watched. After all, he probably remembered that one wall of the lab was actually an observation window, although Wen Qing had kept the cover down since that first morning – had, in fact, changed the control code just in case anyone got some clever ideas.

Then again, he might simply have been hesitant to wash more thoroughly in the aggressively air-conditioned lab with nothing but a small hand towel to dry himself with. To say nothing of the discomfort of finally getting clean, only to put on the same clothing as before, given that he also lacked any way to launder his clothes.

The new outfit, at least, should help with the final problem. As for the other… the next thing Lan Wangji pulled out of the bag was a fresh set of fluffy towels.

Wei Wuxian made a puzzled sound as Lan Wangji deposited the towels in his hands, turning them this way and that with a puzzled expression. He seemed to find the loops of the terrycloth immensely amusing, which didn't surprise Lan Wangji in the least, but he seemed a bit at a loss in determining what these big pieces of fuzzy fabric were *for*.

Then Lan Wangji pulled the last item from his bag, and Wei Wuxian's face lit up with sudden comprehension.

This time, Lan Wangji *did* allow himself a moment of satisfaction. Finding a source that produced something that Wei Wuxian would recognize as similar to the bath beans used in the past had been a challenge. And maybe not *necessary*, in the strictest sense; they'd made certain he had a bar of soap as well, and he'd seemed comfortable enough using it after a demonstration. But Lan Wangji had struggled enough with the complimentary soaps and shampoos at hotels during academic conferences to know the visceral difference between *usable* and *comfortable*, and he'd wanted to give Wei Wuxian something familiar to use.

Well. Nominally familiar. He was fairly certain the mix of scents used in this particular type would normally only have been available to the *very* wealthy, especially given the way Wei Wuxian's eyebrows shot up after he'd given the package an experimental sniff.

Then Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji, a wry cast to his smile. "I…" he started, and then said something that Lan Wangji didn't recognize but, based on the dry amusement as Wei Wuxian pointedly tapped the side of his nose, it probably was, "...*stink?*"

"No," he said firmly. Which, frankly, was something of a miracle, given the conditions in the lab. It helped that the lab had relatively good ventilation, but given that Wei Wuxian had been stuck in a single room with no windows for days with the bare minimum of options for cleaning himself… Lan Wangji honestly would have expected a great deal more, well, *funk* to have accumulated, and the responsibility for that would have been on *them*, not Wei Wuxian.

But while he'd done an admirable job… the Book of Rites had very clear instructions on the importance of maintaining the cleanliness of the body; it was effectively a *moral imperative* by traditional Confucian values. And on a more visceral level, Lan Wangji's skin *crawled* at the thought of being forced to go without a bath or a shower or even fresh clothes or *underwear* for an entire *week*. Possibly even longer than that, given how high in the mountains Wei Wuxian had been; mountain streams were the *last* place anyone with any sense would immerse themselves.

Granted, Wei Wuxian probably had more tolerance for it than Lan Wangji, since he'd lived in an era when hopping into a hot shower every morning wouldn't have even been an option, let alone at all practical. But that was no reason why he should have to go without *now*.

And from the way his whole *body* lit up with enthusiasm as the implications sank in, he was very, *very* ready for a chance to get properly clean.

It was only the work of a minute or two to shift the privacy screens over to the sink and arrange them into a kind of bathing stall; Nie Mingjue had gone over the security footage and provided Lan Wangji with instructions for how to set it up to create a *genuinely* private space, blocked off from the cameras. It helped that they'd managed to acquire two shorter screens that blocked off the counter areas on either side of the sink as well.

By the time they were finished, they'd created a cozy little nook with enough space for Wei Wuxian to set the towels and the new clothes on the bit of counter space inside the screens, where they'd be accessible but hopefully stay dry. The floor wasn't an option; since there was no way he could actually wash *in* the sink, all the water was going to collect on the floor until it reached the drain underneath the thawing table.

This was going to make a mess, no way around that. But a necessary mess. And Lan Wangji had a key to the janitorial closet where the mops were kept and he knew how to use it.

Metal clicked against metal. Blinking, Lan Wangji turned to see that Wei Wuxian had undone his sword belt and set his sword on the stainless steel countertop outside the screen, where it would be out of the way and safe from the water. His black dizi joined it a moment later, as he began unwrapping the sashes of his *dai* from around his waist. Once they were off, he folded them and set them on the counter as well.

And then paused, looking over his shoulder at Lan Wangji with a sly smile that promised *mischief*.

Lan Wangji braced himself. Over the past week, he'd become quite familiar with Wei Wuxian's occasionally *quirky* sense of humor. Although he couldn't help a moment's confusion; the man's pranks and jokes didn't usually come out of nowhere, so why…

Grin broadening, Wei Wuxian *veeery* slowly began opening his outer robe.

…Oh.

Lan Wangji cleared his throat slightly and deliberately ignored the fact that his ears had unquestionably just flamed red again as he tipped his head towards the door. "I will be in the next room," he said, desperately grateful that these at least were phrases he and Wei Wuxian had already established and therefore needed no additional explanation. "Call if you need anything."

Wei Wuxian mock-pouted, grey eyes dancing with unabashed amusement at Lan Wangji's hasty retreat, and then stepped behind the screens, pulling the last panel into place behind him.

Lan Wangji held back a huff as he gathered his now significantly emptied bag and turned to the door. It truly said something that Wei Wuxian would be so skilled at teasing when they could still barely communicate beyond a few set phrases. When the man had better mastered modern language, he was going to be a *menace*.

Lan Wangji was almost looking forward to it.

Then he stepped out into the hallway again, and the moment the door closed behind him, Meng Yao gave him a knowing smirk that instantly raised his hackles. "Going to the observation room already?" he asked, with just enough emphasis on *observation* to make the implications crystal clear.

Lan Wangji gave him a flat stare before turning and stalking to the door of the adjoining room that was only technically an observation room because the window was *covered and locked*, thank you!

For once, he was actually glad there was a morning meeting scheduled. Hopefully by the time it was over, people would stop being *ridiculous*.

Hope was a virtuous emotion. He would not be taking criticism on this matter.

Once the door had latched closed behind Lan Wangji's rapidly retreating presence, Wei Wuxian laughed softly to himself. Really, Lan Wangji just made it so *easy*. He almost felt bad about teasing the man.

Almost!

Briskly, he pulled off his robes, folding them and pushing the small screen by the odd well-basin aside to set them next to Suibian and Chenqing. Although he did pause for a long moment to study his inner robe more carefully.

As he'd thought. Around the torn arrow-hole in the chest, he could just make out a hint of discoloration. Nowhere near as large as it should have been, though. And faint, faint enough that it would have been easy to miss without the hole in the fabric directing the eye.

Then again, cold water is good for washing out blood. I suppose ice is the same?

On the other hand, cold water only worked if you got to the blood before it set. Which matched with the relatively small area: whatever had happened to lead to him apparently being *in ice* (seriously, again, *how*), it must have happened immediately after or even *during* the ambush.

Happy thought, that. *Not*.

Shaking his head, Wei Wuxian folded the inner robe and added it to the pile, then quickly shucked his trousers and boots to add them as well before pulling the screen back into place. Lan Wangji had been so very particular about its placement, after all.

To be honest, he *did* feel a little bad about taking advantage of the man's conscientiousness like this. But needs must, particularly given that he had yet to determine *how* he was being watched despite the apparently closed-off room. Which meant that Lan Wangji's concern for privacy was giving him the first opportunity since he'd awakened that he could be fairly certain he was genuinely unobserved.

Reaching up, he tugged the ribbon holding his ponytail loose, and took a moment to run his hands through his hair, finger-combing it out until it lay more or less smooth. He so very, utterly, *desperately* wanted to wash it out properly now that he had a chance…

But even with those wonderfully fluffy drying cloths, it would take forever to dry, and in the interim he'd just get his interesting new clothes wet, which struck him as rather ungrateful. Not to mention that sitting around in the odd dry chill of this room with wet hair didn't exactly sound very pleasant.

Honestly, he was tempted to do it anyway. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd jury-rigged a cleansing talisman to dry things off quickly. But he was *not* going to waste what was left of his original supplies on it, and he was still figuring out how the strange new paper and writing tools he'd acquired would affect their use in talismans.

It didn't help that he was wary of messing with talismans in the open. He still wasn't certain how much these strange people knew about talismans and cultivation in general. But given that they had their own unfamiliar tools, he was inclined to keep some of his more *creative* options tucked in his sleeve. Just in case!

Besides. Given what he was planning… better not to have water dripping in his face.

So with a sigh, he gathered his hair up in a heavy bun, using his ribbon and a battered hair stick from his pouch to hold it in place. Then he turned the handle of the spigot and started the flow of hot water.

And seriously, *he wanted to know how they did that*. Oh, Lan Wangji had tried to explain the system of tubes and pipes that carried the water from its source to the spigot. Which admittedly had been more confusing than illuminating; language aside, he got the amusing feeling that *Lan Wangji* didn't quite know how the system worked. Which was fair enough; helping irrigate the crops in Yiling that first year had been a novel experience for him, as well. Using something didn't mean you knew how it worked, just ask the many, many cultivators who never bothered to carry more than pre-made talismans.

But that had been about how they moved the water around. He wanted to know where it came from. Surely they didn't have servants who literally did nothing all day but chop wood and tend fires to keep water hot *just in case* someone wanted some – *emperors* couldn't afford that even when they weren't busy trying to kill each other!

Perhaps they were located on or near a natural hot spring? It would at least explain the abundance of readily available hot water, although it was odd that there was no mineral tang to it if that were the case. And even assuming that there *were* hot springs available, why would they waste something as valuable as hot spring water on a prison?

Well. To be fair, he was fairly certain that this place wasn't actually *meant* to be a prison, despite the constant surveillance he could sense and his, well, current circumstances. He just had no idea what it actually was. A healing hall would have been his next guess, given that he *had* been injured and unconscious – and from everyone's yelling and running about that first day, they hadn't actually expected him to wake up, at least not so soon.

Except that he could just imagine the reaction of just about every healer he'd ever met to being asked to work in a space like this. How was anyone supposed to recover properly with the ambient qi so… sterile and stagnant? And while these people didn't seem trained in working with or reading qi, Wen Qing's distaste for the space had been obvious every time she'd visited.

Not to mention that she always had to bring her tools with her. Pretty telling, that.

But while he might be at a loss regarding what this room was intended *for*, he certainly could see what it *was* – and that was *extremely utilitarian*. This was a space for working and getting things done, not the sort of refined area meant for sect leaders and respected guests. So again: why would they go to the trouble of supplying it with hot water?

Then again, I'm certainly not complaining!

Chuckling at his own wandering thoughts, Wei Wuxian picked up the washing cloth he'd received a few days earlier – no reason to use one of the nice drying cloths for this! – and began scrubbing, starting with a quick pass over his face and then working down his neck and then shoulders. And allowed himself a happy sigh. The odd pale bar Lan Wangji had supplied earlier had certainly been *effective*, but… Well, he'd quickly learned to be judicious in how much he used it, since it tended to leave his skin feeling… parched and stretched thin, was maybe the best way to use it. It had made him wish for a bathing oil – but of course he'd run out of that long before he'd left the Burial Mounds.

Which. He'd noticed that there wasn't nearly as much grime on his skin as he had expected. True, he'd done his best to scrub down thoroughly before setting out from the Mounds. But it did support his suspicion that the ambush had happened quickly, before he'd gone very far.

Hopefully it also meant that he hadn't been unconscious for too long. He'd spent several years cleansing the Burial Mounds; hopefully that would have been long enough for Jiang Cheng's temper to cool enough to think with his sense rather than his insecurities again. But if Wei Wuxian returned *late*, the whole mess would just cycle back and start all over. Not to mention anything *else* that might have happened.

And on that note…

Scrubbing at his chest, Wei Wuxian casually began to whistle.

He kept it light, relaxed; one of the lilting folk tunes he'd picked up going past the fields in harvest, as whole communities turned out to tend the fields and bring everyone together.

In the corner of his little nook, shadows began to gather.

Still whistling, Wei Wuxian kept his gaze lowered, only watching the twist of shadow from the corner of his eye. From experience, he knew that how *visible* resentful energy was frequently varied from person to person, and even one ghost to the next – but one consistent thread was that it became far easier to see the moment someone else drew attention to it.

Which was part of why he'd waited. Better not to risk the chance that one of his invisible watchers was one of the more sensitive ones. It would raise some awkward questions!

So instead of watching… he *listened*.

There was no point in risking Empathy right now – even if he *miiight* have exaggerated the degree to which the practitioner would need the assistance of a third party to break out of it to others and in his notes. He never would have walked out of the Mounds in possession of his own mind and body if intervention was actually as necessary as he claimed. But it *was* dangerous enough that having someone else helping you was definitely the better way to do things. If only because the technique left the practitioner insensate to anything happening around them while it was in effect.

Definitely not worth the risk, much as he would have liked to get an insider's view on this strange place. Not yet. For what he needed *right now*, concentrating on the whispers would be enough.

After all, that had always been one of the real advantages of this new form of cultivation. Calling the angry dead to fight was *impressive*, but not exactly efficient, since he was limited to the dead who were already motivated to fight and the ones he could persuade to either redirect their resentment or who just decided to tag along. The former were pretty much restricted to their own dead – which tended to make his allies *twitchy* and thus was just a bad idea in general – and the occasional deeply embittered enemy conscript. The latter took *time*, since he had to find and persuade the dead one or two or a handful at a time.

But he could learn *so much* listening to whispers.

Ghosts were *people*. And people liked to talk. Especially when they'd died badly and had *opinions* on the matter. Tracking the Wen forces was easy when they had a (not-so!) silent entourage of dead civilians and cultivators following their every move.

Which was part of why he and Jiang Cheng had been very cagey about *how*, exactly, they had been getting their information. All things considered, far better to have their allies focused on the fierce corpses than thinking about the possibility that the skeletons in their closets might be telling tales.

To be honest, going back to the Burial Mounds had been something of a relief; the resentment there had its own concerns, and most ghosts actually stayed away. He hadn't exactly *set out* to be a spymaster, after all!

But he'd also be a fool to ignore a useful source of information about his surroundings.

It's hot. So hot.

It was thin, thready, fading in and out from even his ability to hear. There was nothing male or female in that voice, just *lost*.

My throat hurts. I'm so dizzy. Why am I dizzy…?

Oh. He winced a little. He'd dealt with fire-dead before, both the bodies and the spirits left behind. In a way, the ones who died to smoke rather than flames were the hardest; with their bodies untouched, many never even realized they had died… and sometimes were all the more dangerous for it.

And this one… this was an old ghost. The clarity of who it had been in life had faded over decades of existence until there was little left but the memory of its death, on the verge of becoming something both less and *more* than a simple ghost, and potentially *very* dangerous…

Except… it was such a *little* thing. There was no great resentment surging through it, no fury at its death, no lingering grudges or hate. From everything he could feel, it was lingering mostly out of *confusion*, not some overwhelming emotion binding it to a life lost and away from release and reincarnation.

Which… made *no* sense!

Any ghost this small, this *harmless*, shouldn't even need any kind of spiritual intervention beyond a basic calming and cleansing ceremony to liberate it, the sort that people did whenever there was a birth or a death in the community! Even if the victim had been unknown, holding a cleansing after a *fatal fire* was just common sense and basic practice, the sort of thing even village children knew to do!

Except. Not only had this lost one been missed, they weren't alone. Others were gathering as well – many of them even older, wispy echoes of the beings they once had been, little more

than scraps of *essence* without memory or shape.

Which was enough to set alarms clanging in the back of his mind. This *wasn't right*. Not only because those fragile remnants of wraiths deserved the help they needed to pass on safely to their next incarnation. Resentment built on resentment, and with this many drifting spirits, any soul eater that stumbled on this place would be able to feed its power to frightening levels in a matter of just a few *days*.

Not to mention the risk of a stronger ghost doing the same. Like the one that had just surged forward at him—

Well. Started to. Until it actually *looked*, and suddenly realized it had just made a very big mistake.

it wasn't my fault it was their fault they deserved it they were the ones in the way they had to go they were the traitors everyone knows I *was doing the right thing* I *wasn't the bad one*

Eyes narrowed, Wei Wuxian added a sharp, piercing rebuke to his whistling, forcing the surging resentment to flinch back and away, and also cutting it off from the first ghost, which had cringed away even as the wisps of its own energy started to merge with the raging specter.

Which was enough to tell him that the two ghosts were likely exactly the same age, even without the crackle of remembered flames that betrayed how the second had met its death.

Although the sense of *self* – or perhaps better to think of it as *shape and purpose* – was far stronger with the second. Not surprising, really. The obsessive focus of fanaticism often led to *very* strong resentful energy after death. He'd seen the old battlefields from the rebellions at the fall of the Han. Not all the rebels had been fanatics, of course – not even most of them. But those who were… some of those spirits still had yet to be cleansed, even after three hundred years.

Not that all the fighting in the years since had helped matters. More than a few of those ghosts had formed the seeds of the sort of abysses and corrupted lands that *no one* could handle. Although he'd been thinking of trying…

But that made the situation *here* all the more disturbing. The ghost wasn't a *powerful* one, no. But it was definitely trouble waiting to happen.

Tapping his fingers, Wei Wuxian considered his options for a moment, and shifted from whistling to simply humming. His lips could use a break – and at this point, if he kept calling resentful energy in, he would run the risk of it overflowing beyond the bounds of this protected little nook Lan Wangji had so considerately made for him.

Besides. He'd gathered enough to draw a few tentative conclusions.

Most significant – the fire ghosts were old. Fifty years or so, if he had to guess. And yet they seemed to be the most recent ones, at least within his range and unbound to a single place.

Which strongly suggested that there hadn't been much in the way of violent death in this area since.

So. *Something* had happened here, roughly fifty years ago. A civil war or some other kind of internal power struggle, if he had to guess. Something that had disrupted things long enough that by the time people could spare a thought for calming ceremonies, the fact that said ceremonies hadn't actually happened yet had slipped everyone's minds. And the years since that time had been peaceful enough that no new ghosts had formed.

Which was a little unsettling, given what he'd gathered about some kind of factional conflict on the other side of the door; fifty years sounded just about long enough for people to forget just how much wars *sucked*.

But if the area had been peaceful for decades, when Wei Wuxian knew *intimately* how disruptive Wen Ruohan's expansion and the Sunshot Campaign had been…

Isolated. Extremely *isolated.*

Which, well, it wasn't like he hadn't already guessed as much, given the unfamiliar tools and fabrics and their *distinct* lack of knowledge about the war. But it might explain why no cultivator had been through to do anything about the ghosts; true, the larger sects tended not to act on anything that wasn't powerful enough to build their reputation, but normally smaller family sects and unaffiliated cultivators were good about dealing with smaller problems before they could escalate. But if this place was so isolated that even rogues tended not to wander through – and they didn't seem to even use spiritual tools; everything he'd seen thus far had seemed mechanical at its core…

Well, that was a hair-raising thought. With this sort of neglect, what condition were the local dragon-lines in? The last thing anyone needed was a disruption in the spiritual meridians of the *earth itself*!

On the other hand, there hadn't been any fierce corpses lumbering up at his call, so at the very least, the dead *were* being tended to, and the living remembered them. And he couldn't feel any of the worn tension that had marked the edges of the Burial Mounds, so at worst the dragon lines were only shadowed, not warped.

And, well, whatever had happened before, there was certainly a cultivator here now!

He shifted back to whistling, with a sharp trill to scatter the accumulated energy of the angry ghost and send it retreating. He'd have to deal with that one eventually, of course; it certainly wasn't going to pass on its own if it was still lingering after fifty years. But better to save that for later. It was relatively weak, certainly, but liberating it would take time… and if it was too locked in obsession, well, even a weak ghost could get very *nasty*, and he'd rather hold off on anything dramatic until he had a better idea of his own situation. Besides, maybe he could learn enough about what had happened to improve his odds of actually releasing the spirit rather than sealing or eliminating it.

But the others…

He shifted his whistling, dropping into a low, quiet lullaby that projected peace. Quiet. Calm.

It's over. You can rest now.

And that was all it took; with a shimmer like a soft, tired sigh, the fire ghost steadied, strengthened… and then faded away completely, passing on to whatever came next.

Seriously. *How* had that one lingered for so long?

Wiping away the last residue of the bath beans, Wei Wuxian turned the song to the other wisps of spirits that had gathered. There was no reason to leave them adrift; he was hardly in such desperate straits that he needed the little strength they could muster, and none of them were bound so tightly to the world that they *needed* more time to distance themselves from their resentment.

In fact…

Frowning slightly, Wei Wuxian reached for the fuzzy cloths and began drying himself, still thinking hard. Because those wisps *should not have been there* in the first place. Even if no cultivators had been near this place in decades – even a century! – just the familiar everyday cycles of life and the annual festivals should have been enough for most of them to settle their attachments and move on. And… now that he'd cleansed his immediate surroundings, he was abruptly realizing just *how much* resentful energy was in the area. Even the ambient qi felt… unsettled. Off.

Really, this was *embarrassing*! He should have noticed this sooner!

Granted, it had been this way ever since he'd awakened here. And given that he'd been in the Burial Mounds for three years now, and even after the work he'd put into cleansing them they'd still been *far* worse than this, he could probably be forgiven for being a little slow to notice.

Still. What was going on here?

Well, he'd at least verified one thing – given the relative weakness of the lingering energies, he was fairly confident now that his first impression had been right: this wasn't actually a prison. Even if no one died in them – rare! – prisons tended to accumulate resentment and misery. Which did support Lan Wangji's claim that they were keeping him here because they were concerned about diseases for some reason.

Then again, there hadn't been any plague-dead among the ghosts, either. So while Lan Wangji *seemed* earnestly honest… Well, that hadn't been the clearest conversation, he might have misunderstood something!

And now that he'd accomplished what he'd planned to do – and finally, *finally* felt properly clean, except for his hair! – he probably shouldn't keep the man waiting too much longer. And while the bright red ears and gloriously grumpy flat stare *were* highly entertaining, the man had gone to some trouble to provide Wei Wuxian with new clothes. He might as well try them!

The strange legless trousers – under-trousers? – were… unsettlingly snug, but not actually uncomfortable. And the trousers themselves were familiar enough, although the silk and dye were distinctly high quality. The high-necked red underrobe, though…

Well. He was at least accustomed to arrow sleeves that ran close to the arms with fitted cuffs – no self-respecting Jiang was going to mess with multi-layered, wide-sweeping sleeves like the Lan wore when a night hunt might take you underwater without warning. But the way the luxuriantly soft, flexible fabric draped across shoulders and chest…

He'd felt less exposed going bare-chested in Yunmeng's hot summers!

Of course, it also didn't help that the robe ended barely a handspan below his hips, much too short for anything even *resembling* modesty. He normally gloried in his own shamelessness, but even he would need time to get used to this!

On the other hand, this did seem to be the standard style of the region. So get used to it he might as well.

And then there was the color – a deep, practically *decadent* red that shone where the light struck it with the soft luster of silk. Like the blue shirt he'd admired a few days ago, the color was perfectly even across the entire garment, and he wasn't sure he wanted to even try imagining how much it would cost to achieve such a deep color across an *entire garment*, rather than simply trim on the visible edges. Who wore that much red outside of nobility and weddings?

The overrobe was equally striking – a dark charcoal grey that was intentional, not just a faded black, especially given the stark black edgework. Pulling it on, Wei Wuxian ignored the strange narrow belt – he'd just wrap his own dai over it instead, that would definitely be more comfortable – and instead paused to consider the effect.

The clothes were *striking*; there was no mistaking the high quality of the fabric and stitch work. But they also didn't match what he'd seen anyone else in this place wearing.

If he were dealing with, oh, the Jin, he'd suspect that was a deliberate sartorial snub. They certainly had no reservations about marking someone as an outsider. But that didn't fit with the obvious effort and expense that must have gone into acquiring the clothes – or Lan Wangji's character, for that matter. And it hadn't slipped his notice that Lan Wangji had clearly gone out of his way to provide him with something that was *close* to his own clothes in both style and color – rather different from, say, the Wen or the Lan, who expected even guests to don their colors and styles in cultivation conferences and lectures.

Courtesy, then? An effort to make sure he was comfortable? Which honestly seemed equally odd – it was a great deal of trouble to go to on behalf of an unknown cultivator!

Then again, he rather got the impression that Lan Wangji was simply *like that*. Courteous to the bone, even if it sometimes felt like the rules of courtesy were turned sideways to what he expected.

And it was a very nice outfit! Even if parts of it felt *very* strange. And…

Wei Wuxian chuckled to himself, looking down at his bare feet. Yes, the bare ankles and toes poking out like that definitely made the overall effect a little silly!

Ah well. It wasn't like Lan Wangji had brought in a cobbler to take measurements, and badly fitted shoes could frankly be worse than no shoes at all. And he'd noticed that even among the small handful of people he'd met so far, there had been a rather dizzying variety of footwear.

Not that he normally spent much time looking at peoples' feet. But you could learn a great deal from someone's stance! And the odd squeaking and clacking had drawn his attention!

And some of the footwear here was *very* odd indeed. Wen Yuan's probably the most so; the boy had been wearing bizarrely bulky shoes made of an odd patchwork of fabric and leather, still brightly colored under a patina of dust and wear, with soles made from some strange thick white material that actually flared out beyond the edges of his feet and *decorative patterns on the bottom*, still visible despite obvious wear flattening the pattern out near the heels and toes.

Clearly the boy had never needed to worry about evading human trackers; Wei Wuxian could think of several moments where such distinctive footprints would probably have gotten him killed.

And that didn't even get into Nie Mingjue's worn leather boots, fastened with some kind of cord criss-crossing between metal hooks and soled with a hard black material that had to add a solid finger-breadth or two to the man's already impressive height, with the sole itself broken into outcroppings like jagged teeth. And then there were Wen Qing's slippers, which appeared normal until you realized that the heels were *propped up on spikes*.

…Balance training? Maybe? Or maybe she just liked the sharp *clack-click* the spikes made with each step. Not to mention that those spikes would probably do not insignificant damage if a strong kick planted one somewhere sensitive. Not that that really seemed her style, but it wasn't hard to imagine her valuing it as a fallback plan.

Compared to those, Lan Wangji's glossy white leather shoes with their slightly elongated toes were practically unremarkable. Outside the eternal question of how in the world the man managed to keep them *clean*.

All in all… his own boots might be distinctly worn around the edges, but they were unlikely to stand out any more than his new clothes already seemed to. So he might as well stick with those and be comfortable—

Except that, when he pushed the screens aside, his boots weren't where he'd left them.

Very deliberately, Wei Wuxian paused, eyes sweeping the room as he took in what was there. And more importantly, what *wasn't*.

Well. This complicates things a bit, doesn't it.

What had happened was obvious enough. Whoever they'd been, they hadn't even bothered to avoid the water on the floor, leaving a set of tracks leading straight to the door.

Which just left who, why… and what he was going to do about it.

Well. First things first. An advantage to using whistling as a cultivation technique: when he was so inclined, he could whistle *very, very loudly*.

Only a few moments later, the door opened and Lan Wangji walked in… and froze, taking in the sight of Wei Wuxian standing in the middle of the room, barefoot, arms crossed over his chest and not even trying to hide the hard look on his face.

Steadily, Wei Wuxian met the man's eyes. Then, pointedly, he tilted his head towards the empty counter where he'd left his clothes and belongings, before dropping his eyes down to the floor.

He *saw* the moment that baffled confusion became comprehension as Lan Wangji registered the wet footprints on the floor, followed by…

Huh. So that was what incandescent fury looked like on the man. It… actually wasn't all that different from his resting expression, really. Which was honestly kind of amusing!

Not to mention a relief. In the absence of any other source of information, he'd been forced to rely on his impression that Lan Wangji was being… well, maybe not *honest* exactly – there'd been far too many moment-too-long hesitations, too many little details that didn't quite add up – but at least *sincere* in his efforts to help Wei Wuxian. He certainly hadn't seemed the type to participate in something quite so… underhanded.

But Wei Wuxian had to consider the possibility. Particularly given that the very first moment he'd let himself be vulnerable and distracted, this had happened.

But from the way Lan Wangji turned sharply on his heel to throw the door open again, he definitely was *not* pleased. Relaxing slightly, Wei Wuxian listened to the conversation – much too fast for him to actually understand what they were saying, of course, but inflection alone could tell him a great deal. Lan Wangji's tone was sharp, clipped – even for him, which was saying something. But the guard…

Discomfort. Dismay. Apologetic, but in a confused way.

It was a familiar enough tone; he'd certainly heard it plenty of times, when Madam Yu had swept in to contradict Sect Leader Jiang's orders. And during the Sunshot Campaign, because the problem of an alliance of supposedly equal powers was that sometimes you had three people in camp giving conflicting orders. And it wasn't uncommon for commands to be flung in the direction of the nearest subordinate without concern for whether they were *your* subordinate, leaving the subordinate to decide if it was better to obey for the sake of the alliance or stand their ground for the sake of their own sect's chain of command. And whether their own leader would back them if someone got tetchy over their "arrogance" if they chose the latter.

So. Someone with more influence than the guard, and perhaps the guard's immediate commander, had come through with contradictory orders.

Which meant that the factional tension he'd noticed on the other side of the door was escalating. And, notably, wasn't staying on the other side of the door now.

Shoulders a stiff, hard line, Lan Wangji started to stalk out the door – then paused and turned to look at Wei Wuxian.

"Apology," he said stiffly, awkwardly – and in the language of the sects, rather than the local tongue Wei Wuxian had been learning. For emphasis? Sincerity? "Wait. Return will."

Then he was gone, the door closing behind him rather harder than the norm.

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. Wait?

I don't think so!

Really, he was feeling a bit *irate*. Taking Suibian and Chenqing was one thing; he was honestly astounded he'd been allowed to keep his weapons at all. Even the boots made sense – harder to escape in bare feet, after all, even if it didn't seem quite cold enough for there to be snow on the ground outside, even taking into consideration the closed-off space he was in.

But even the Wen had had face enough to *demand* weapons be handed over. Sneaking in to steal them when he was bathing? That was simply *tacky*.

And taking his clarity bell? The pouch with the comb Shijie had given him? His *underrobe*?

Rude!

Clearly he'd been a little *too* well behaved, biding his time to get a better grasp of the situation. Jiang Cheng would probably think he was possessed!

On the other hand… Given that Lan Wangji appeared to have been against this little stunt, he didn't want to put the man at a disadvantage in whatever power struggle was going on. Which meant that he probably *should* stay where he was for the time being. If only because it was a defensible location, should things come to that.

Well then.

Pursing his lips, he focused inside, assessing the state of his core. After so much time meditating – after all, he didn't exactly have much else to do! – it wasn't as drained as it had been when he'd first awakened, but that odd *bruised* sensation was still aching at him, only marginally improved. Whatever had happened, recovery was apparently going to take a while.

At least it was improving; hopefully that meant that his core *would* recover, given time.

And for now, it was strong enough and stable enough for what he meant to do.

He grinned. Time to set some *boundaries*.

"I'm still trying to find out where Su Minshan got the bullets he was using," Nie Mingjue reported. "He insists that he received them from our equipment provider with all appropriate clearances and assumed that they were distributed to all security personnel in light of the heightened security needs of the project."

Bullshit. There was no way that the requisitions office would even have acquired live ammunition without an insane amount of paperwork that would have piled up squarely on *his* desk. They were campus security, not the army!

If this whole mess was Su Minshan's idea, then either he'd gone to the black market for weaponry – not impossible, but damned unlikely – or at least one other person had been involved, someone who knew how to fudge the paperwork and slip the package out without Meng Yao catching them.

And that was the *optimistic* scenario.

Aloud, he concluded, "I think he's lying, but if that's the case, he's sticking to his story."

Lan Qiren's scowl was black as thunder. "That man brought a lethal weapon onto campus and fired it at a *teenage boy*. Why has he not been fired and turned in to the authorities?!"

I wish! "Believe me, I'd love to," Nie Mingjue said bluntly. "Unfortunately, there are two complications. The first is that if we do that, we lose our best lead on where he got those bullets."

Lan Qiren raised a skeptical eyebrow in an expression that made it perfectly obvious that he and Lan Wangji were related. "I was under the impression that investigation was the *point* of handing things like this to the authorities," he said curtly.

"Except for the second problem: the minute he realizes how deep in it he is, he's going to be singing like a bird to *anyone and everyone* who'll listen."

Not that it was going to actually help his case if he did, but that was hardly going to stop the man. And most people weren't going to believe him… but there were plenty of people who'd happily take it as an excuse to start meddling.

Besides, the last thing they needed was stories about horror movie monsters lodged in people's heads before they even went public about Wei Wuxian.

Lan Qiren waved a hand dismissively. "He signed an NDA…"

"He signed quite a few documents about procedures, acceptable equipment and de-escalation techniques, too," Nie Mingjue said dryly. "And yet here we are."

Lan Qiren's scowl deepened, but at least he granted the point. "Then we have the officers involved sign them. Surely this isn't the first sensitive case they've handled."

Sensitive nothing. Try explosive, Nie Mingjue snorted, although he carefully kept it in the privacy of his own head. Police detectives were usually good, but there was keeping quiet about live weapons on campus – and he wasn't sure he *wanted* that hushed, even considering as much trouble as it would bring down on their heads – and then there was *Yiling Laozu is alive*.

It wouldn't be enough to keep watch against someone out to grab their whistle-blowing fifteen minutes of fame. All it would take was one person whose mind was so blown that it disengaged their brain-to-texting filter.

But if Lan Qiren thought that *signing an NDA* would be enough to keep gossip from spreading, Nie Mingjue doubted the man would consider twitchy texting thumbs to be a genuine concern. So. "You might be able to convince them to keep the investigation under wraps—" Absent any officers in the pockets of crime lords or politicians or nosy reporters. "—but just the *existence* of a hush-hush investigation is going to draw attention."

Secrets only stayed that way so long as no one realized there was a secret being kept, after all.

Nie Mingjue looked at Lan Qiren. "This is going to get out eventually," he admitted bluntly. "The best I can do is buy time for you to get ready for it. Have you looked into finding a PR manager yet?"

Lan Qiren bristled. "Public relations!" he huffed. "We are doing scientific research here, not engaging in some kind of political circus!"

Nie Mingjue drew in a deep breath and reminded himself that they'd been through this before. Lan Qiren had seen no point in arranging extra security for the Yiling Laozu project in the first place; he'd insisted that it was "just" scientific research – as if information wasn't the most valuable currency in the world. He'd only changed his tune when someone had managed to actually break into the lab, injuring Meng Yao when he'd gone to investigate and very nearly breaching the vault where Yiling Laozu was stored.

And if he was going to be honest, that incident was part of why Nie Mingjue was wary about handing the issue of Su Minshan over to the police. He'd done that with that first break-in… and gotten nothing but radio silence since. Not even a "we are investigating" or "we haven't found any leads."

Given that he *knew* that certain crime rings actively targeted antiquities? Including human remains? That was deeply worrying.

(And contemplating that close call now, when he knew Wei Wuxian had been alive in the ice all along? Brrr. Pun not intended.)

As for now… "This is already political," he said bluntly. "It was political the moment people decided they cared about what happened to Yiling Laozu, long before the university ever got involved." He paused, pointedly. "And as your security head, I need to warn you that it's possible the politics may be getting ugly. I don't think it's a coincidence that a trigger-happy guy like Su Minshan somehow managed to get his hands on live ammunition."

Lan Qiren stared at him.

"A crowd of protesters, most of whom are young, and a jumpy guard carrying live ammunition?" Nie Mingjue shook his head. "That's a tragedy waiting to happen, Director. More than that, it would be a *scandal*. All of it tied to a highly controversial research project." There were any number of parties that would drool over the chance that would represent. Which meant there could well be someone out there with the means and the motive to make it happen.

He didn't *know* that was the case. But he trusted his gut.

Lan Qiren huffed impatiently. "Those ridiculous protestors again. Such behavior is pointless and benefits no one!"

Oh, Nie Mingjue could think of a few people who very much stood to benefit, especially after that attempted break-in.

Not to mention the fact that the Party leadership historically took a very dim view on any source of mass agitation. Especially when it came to questioning official decisions. He wasn't certain how he felt about the fact that the government had yet to crack down on the protestors… but either way, it wasn't a good sign.

But he also knew when a conversation had hit a brick wall. To Lan Qiren, politics and public opinion had no place in Science… and therefore warranted no consideration. *Argh*.

Well. He'd said his piece. Maybe it would sink in over time, maybe not. For now… "Pointless or not, it has my people spread thin." Especially given his concerns that Su Minshan hadn't been working alone. He didn't have much choice except to vet each of them all over again, and that was going to take time. "I don't have many I can spare to keep watch at the lab right now…"

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "There is no reason to have a guard standing there at all," he said dourly. "The project team is made up of responsible and conscientious scholars, and your assumption that their behavior must be *policed* is insulting."

Now it was Nie Mingjue's turn to stare. "Does that behavior include *actively harassing* my people to try to get into an area that *you yourself* declared to be off-limits until further notice?"

Lan Qiren scowled. "I was quite clear that concerns and suggestions regarding physical access must go through Xichen, as project manager."

Well, that explained a few things. All too many people would hear that as "you can break the rules if your justification is good enough." No wonder Lan Xichen was under siege.

He cleared his throat. "Sir, it might help if you…" he started – then stopped short.

His phone was buzzing.

Lan Qiren scowled, clearly about to scold him about proper phone etiquette. Nie Mingjue ignored him and grabbed the device, heart sinking. Because he *had* set his phone to meeting mode. Which meant he should only get a notification if it was a priority message—

From Meng Yao. Who was on lab watch.

Swearing mentally, Nie Mingjue opened the message. Stared.

Then he was on his feet. "Director, come with me," he said grimly. "We have a crisis to deal with, and it needs to be dealt with *now*."

And it was damn well time the man stopped burying his head in the sand and *directed*!

Lan Qiren actually spluttered, face going beet red with offended fury. Which, he was just going to have to deal, because—

"*Ugh*, what's wrong with this thing?! How can it be *stuck*?" A loud *clunk*, as if something metallic had been slammed against the table in the front hallway. "…*still* stuck? Tch. *Fine*. Who cares, this is sick-awesome anyway! Wait 'til I show the guys, they're gonna be so jealous they *puke*…"

That was the thing about being a big, burly guy: no one ever expected him to be fast.

Not that Jin Zixun was actually looking. He was so busy trying to yank the sword out of its sheath that he didn't realize someone was blocking the door until he walked straight into Nie Mingjue's chest and bounced.

He didn't actually fall on his ass, although he staggered several steps back. Shame.

Then again, it wasn't like Nie Mingjue actually needed any extra height to stare down at him like a portent of doom. "There had better be a damn good explanation for this."

To his credit, Jin Zixun did flinch for a moment. Then, because he had the common sense of a spoiled yappy dog trying to exert dominance over a tiger, he stuck his chest out and strode forward again. "Get out of my way!"

Arms still crossed, Nie Mingjue didn't budge. Seriously, did Jin Zixun expect to *physically intimidate* him? That yappy dog comparison was feeling more apt every moment.

Instead, he just looked pointedly at the sword Jin Zixun was brandishing in one hand, still in its sheath, and the overstuffed bag on his other arm, dark fabric dangling from the opening and straining the thin white plastic to near bursting. Hell, it had *already* broken in one corner, the dark end of that flute Lan Wangji was so impressed with poking out like a defiant middle finger, and from the way the hole had already stretched itself, the structural integrity of that bag was not long for this world. "Not until you explain what you're doing with things you have no business touching."

Jin Zixun sneered. "Yeah, that's what *you* think—"

“Jin Zixun!” Professor Yao hurried down the hallway, puffing with fury, a wide-eyed Lan Xichen trailing behind him. “What are you *doing*?” he spluttered. “Those are to go directly to my office! They are priceless artifacts, treat them with respect!”

…Oh, I don’t like where this is going.

Jin Zixun scoffed, turning to the professor and coincidentally taking a step back from Nie Mingjue. “Priceless artifact? What’s *priceless* about this?!” he demanded, waving the sheathed sword in the air. “The stupid thing is stuck!”

“It is also *not yours to take*.”

Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrows slightly as Lan Wangji stalked forward, mildly impressed. He didn’t often encounter a civilian who wasn’t ex-military who could pull off the aura of focused fury that the cool kids called *killing intent*. Not to mention that he was pretty sure that the ambient temperature had just dropped a few degrees.

Obviously recognizing the temper of the room, Lan Xichen quickly stepped forward, hands raised in appeal. “Everyone – please, let’s calm down. Apparently there’s been a bit of miscommunication.”

Miscommunication. Bracing himself, Nie Mingjue looked at the man who’d slipped in quietly behind Lan Wangji. “Meng Yao. You were on door duty.” Technically he still *was*, but this was obviously something they needed to sort out *now*. He’d just have to pray that there wasn’t anyone lurking in the shadows to take advantage of the chaos… which wasn’t easy, given everything he’d just been discussing with Lan Qiren. Dammit, this was a complication they *did not need*!

Meng Yao hesitated, biting his lip as his eyes darted back and forth between the tense and angry faces gathered in the hallway: Lan Qiren’s stormcloud glower in the doorway of the meeting room, Nie Mingjue and Jin Zixun facing off by the door to outside, Professor Yao’s apoplectic blustering and Lan Xichen’s tired resignation, and Lan Wangji’s flat stare that somehow managed to radiate the sense that the man was very much inclined to *kill something*.

Meng Yao swallowed and turned to answer Nie Mingjue, eyes skittering down to the floor. “I… He had written clearance, sir.”

“*What.*”

And that was Wen Qing, heels sharp on the tiled floor as she stalked down the hallway herself – either Lan Wangji or Meng Yao must have alerted her to what was going on.

“And *how*,” she asked icily, “did he get that?”

Lan Xichen sighed and stepped forward, smiling. “I gave it to him, of course.”

Blast. I didn’t want to be right!

Lan Xichen shook his head. “Doctor Wen, Professor Yao’s responsibility is to catalogue the peripheral artifacts, not dealing with Yiling Laozu himself. That *must* be done before any other research can proceed. It is entirely unreasonable to demand that he delay his work when it requires no contact! I recognize your concerns, of course, but as project manager my job is to ensure that everyone can conduct their research efficiently and effectively. This really is the most reasonable solution.”

“Reasonable.” Wen Qing’s incredulous stare belied her flat tone. “You consider giving Jin Zixun permission to *breach quarantine* and *steal* Wei Wuxian’s personal belongings as a reasonable solution?”

Lan Xichen frowned at her. “Doctor Qing, I acknowledge that Jin Zixun overstepped. However, that is no justification for engaging in divisive hyperbole…”

“So there you have it!” Jin Zixun snapped, and whirled to gesture contemptuously at Nie Mingjue. “Now tell this oaf—!”

Metal rasped on metal as the sword flew free of its sheath. Reflexively, Nie Mingjue raised a hand to block and hopefully catch the hilt, mentally swearing; all the gesticulating must have finally knocked loose whatever latch or catch that had locked it in place—

Except then the blade snapped around, striking the sheath out of Jin Zixun’s hand. And stopped, hovering in midair, sharp point a mere centimeter from the man’s throat.

In the dead silence that fell around them, Nie Mingjue blinked at the sword, gleaming in the air in a way that had nothing to do with the hallway lights.

Huh. Guess I win that bet.

“That,” Wen Qing said finally, “appears to be a rather definitive *permission not granted*, Professors.” Her eyes were huge in a shock-pale face as she stared at the *floating sword*, but her voice was unyielding, frost-edged iron.

Her words shattered the shocked silence that had frozen everyone in place. With only a subtle shift of his shoulders to betray his own stunned reaction, Lan Wangji stepped forward, gold eyes fixed on Jin Zixun like a hawk staring at a particularly irritating mouse. “Those items were not yours to take,” he said. “Return them. *Immediately*.”

“Ah… I… Uh… Fine! Who wants them anyway! Take them take them *take them*!”

Jin Zixun flung the bag at Nie Mingjue and bolted – although he didn’t get far, Meng Yao catching him by the collar before he could flee down the hallway. Nie Mingjue ignored him for the moment, desperately trying to keep the bag’s contents from scattering everywhere as the overstressed plastic finally tore. Somehow, he pulled it off – although only a lucky catch with one pinky on the red tassel kept the dizi from hitting the floor.

“What are you doing!” Professor Yao demanded, hands twitching in the air. “You cannot just fling valuable artifacts about! Now…” He stopped short, eyes bugging out, as Nie Mingjue

passed the jumbled mess over to Lan Wangji. “What are you doing?!” he squawked again, higher-pitched this time.

“Making sure these get returned to the person who *owns them*,” Nie Mingjue replied curtly.

“But you can’t just—!” Professor Yao’s words broke off suddenly, his eyes darting to the sword still hovering in the air. Now that Jin Zixun had backed away, the sword had straightened to a vertical line, point towards the floor, and Nie Mingjue was pretty sure that if it was possible for a sword to radiate innocence, that was *exactly* what it was doing. Professor Yao darted a wide-eyed look at it, then turned a desperate look at Lan Xichen.

Lan Xichen’s mouth opened and closed slowly as he blinked looking back and forth between the floating sword and Lan Wangji’s set, hard expression. “I… well, under the circumstances…” he said slowly, sounding honestly uncertain *what* he should be saying.

“They go back to Wei Wuxian,” Wen Qing said briskly. “And I’m calling a meeting tomorrow morning. All project staff. There are apparently some things that we need to clarify. Until then…” Her eyes swept the gathering. “Everyone except for me, Nie Mingjue, and Lan Wangji, *please leave the building*.”

That, it seemed, was finally enough to jar Lan Qiren from his stunned silence. “Doctor Wen!” he thundered, face purpling. “You don’t have the authority—!”

And that was the crux of this whole mess, wasn’t it? Authority. Who had it, who didn’t, and who *thought* they did.

Wen Qing was right. They needed to sort this out in front of everyone. Or they’d just end up back in this loop of people filtering facts to match their own convenience.

In the meantime…

Nie Mingjue cleared his throat. “As head of security,” he said, warningly mild, “I do. Everyone, *out*.”

Lan Wangji was *furious*.

Furious, and deeply, bitterly disappointed.

Deliberately calming and controlling his breathing, he ignored Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue chivvying the still-protesting researchers out of the building, assisted by Meng Yao’s soothing assurances smoothing ruffled feathers somewhat, and set Wei Wuxian’s belongings down on the table to sort out. Luckily, nothing appeared to have been damaged or lost – although they would need Wei Wuxian to verify that, given the hole in the bag. The bag itself was useless at this point, so he discarded it and set about folding the robes properly, before pulling off his lab coat to wrap everything up in an impromptu package. Only then did he look up, to see that the hallway had been cleared of everyone but himself, Wen Qing, Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao, who was standing hesitantly by the door.

“Should I…?” he asked hesitantly. “I know Doctor Wen said *everyone*, but…”

“Take the front door post until we get back; I suspect we might have *someone* try to sneak back in.” Nie Mingjue grimaced. “A tiny blessing: Jin Zixun isn’t going to want to admit to actually wetting himself over this, not even to himself. So he’s not going to take a rampage of grievances to his uncle… yet. But you can bet there’s going to be trouble from that direction sooner rather than later.”

Meng Yao winced. “I know I should have turned him away. Or at least called on you or Doctor Wen. But he had signed permission from Professor Lan, and…”

“And he’s the project manager – not to mention you’re friends,” Nie Mingjue nodded. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault he did an end-run like that, and you shouldn’t have been caught in the middle.”

Personally, Lan Wangji thought that was overly generous, given that Meng Yao had had *one job* and ended up letting Jin Zixun, of all people, into the lab *exactly* when Wei Wuxian had been distracted, vulnerable, and *trusting them* to protect his space and privacy! But Meng Yao wasn’t his subordinate.

“That said,” Nie Mingjue continued, “this whole situation is a cluster…” He hesitated. Glanced at Lan Wangji and Wen Qing. Coughed. “A mess,” he corrected himself. “So right now, I need to invoke need to know until the three of us have figured out the best way to tackle it.”

Meng Yao winced, but nodded, opening the door and heading for the security desk in the atrium.

Once he was gone, Nie Mingjue sighed. And then glanced at the sword still hovering demurely in the air nearby, as if it wasn’t breaking the laws of physics, and several brains, in the process. “So. Any ideas about what to do about that?”

“Mn.” Leaving the coat-wrapped bundle on the table for the moment, Lan Wangji bent down and picked up the scabbard from where it had fallen when Jin Zixun dropped it. For a moment, his fingers froze a few millimeters above polished wood, as if his own body was objecting to the sheer temerity of touching it. Then, firmly, he picked it up and straightened, holding the opening of the sheath towards the sword in a silent invitation.

The sword swept up and around, aligning the blade and sliding home with such a smooth motion that Lan Wangji didn’t even think to flinch until it had already settled into place, the weight of wood and steel solid in his hand.

Startlingly solid, in fact. Intellectually, of course, he was well aware that swords were heavy, that – not unlike a gymnast lifting their own body – it took a substantial amount of strength to wield one quickly and lightly.

It was just… disconcerting to be reminded of that fact by a sword that had just been *moving of its own accord*.

Nie Mingjue and Wen Qing both visibly relaxed as Lan Wangji lowered the now-sheathed sword and set it atop the bundle of other stolen items. “Right,” Nie Mingjue said, and shook his head. “You two, go and take those back, and I’ll meet you…”

“Come with us,” Lan Wangji said.

Nie Mingjue hesitated. “I haven’t been quarantined these last few days…”

“No, he’s right,” Wen Qing said when Nie Mingjue hesitated. “This whole mess is bad enough from our end, but for Wei Wuxian, this has been a massive breach of his trust. You shouldn’t stay long, we still want to minimize exposure… but we need to show him that you’re on his side here.”

“…Ah,” Nie Mingjue said, nodding. “And since we have no idea how much he actually perceived through *that*…” He tilted his head towards the sword. “Better to make it clear.”

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. There was an odd weight to their words, as if Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue were having a second, unspoken conversation that he couldn’t quite follow.

Whatever that conversation was, they seemed to have come to some kind of accord through the spaces between their words. With a gusty sigh, Nie Mingjue waved in the direction of the hallway. “Well. Shall we?”

Lan Wangji picked up the bundle of Wei Wuxian’s belongings and led them silently past the elevator and towards the stairs. They climbed in silence, each caught in their own thoughts.

There was… a great deal to process about the events of the past… fifteen minutes? Twenty? If even that.

Astonishing, how quickly the world could change.

“Hey.” Nie Mingjue’s voice was uncharacteristically quiet. When Lan Wangji glanced to the side, he saw the man looking at him steadily. “You okay?” he asked. “I meant what I said back there – this is a mess. And for you it’s a family mess, on top of everything else.”

Pressing his lips together, Lan Wangji didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling, in honesty.

Beyond profoundly *shaken*. At some level, he was beginning to realize, he’d believed that the situation was stable. For all Wen Qing’s and Nie Mingjue’s concerns, he’d been under the impression that everything was in order. Under control.

It was… deeply disturbing to realize how much that was not the case. It felt like an ugly fire burning just under his skin, a hard cold weight under his ribs, this desperate urge to *do something*, with no idea what he should or even *could* do.

The door to the lab was still closed. Lan Wangji gave himself a moment, then knocked briskly.

For a long second, there was no response, and his mind began racing. Had Wei Wuxian decided to leave and take his chances with the unknown world beyond the lab, rather than remain in a space that he now *knew* was not truly safe? He would not be unjustified; he already knew there were things that Lan Wangji was not telling him…

Finally, however: "Come in."

Wei Wuxian's voice was cool. Dangerously neutral.

And, *come in*. Not the *who's there* that had always greeted Lan Wangji before. That felt… deliberate. Like a point was being made. The question was, *what* point?

…Then again, was it so hard to guess? After all, Wei Wuxian *knew*, now, that his permission or lack thereof was no barrier to entry. Or rather, that those who didn't care wouldn't have bothered to knock in the first place. And he wasn't inclined to humor anyone by pretending otherwise right now.

Wincing internally, Lan Wangji unlocked the door. Opened it. And stopped short.

Wei Wuxian cut a striking figure, standing exactly where he'd been when Lan Wangji had left, arms crossed over his chest and feet set slightly wide, as if prepared to move at any moment. Incongruously, the lack of that enveloping grey robe actually made him seem taller, the deep, vivid red of the shirt and dark lines of the coat accentuating broad shoulders and long legs – even if the bare feet made for an odd counterpoint.

Not that Lan Wangji was looking at his feet. Not when his gaze was arrested by eyes that were no longer laughing silver, but steel-bright and sharp as the blade of the sheathed sword in Lan Wangji's hand.

The eyes of someone fully capable of being *very dangerous*.

It should have been off-putting, to say the least. And yet… it wasn't. He felt more as if a veil had been momentarily pulled back from his eyes, allowing him to finally *see* something that had always been there, just never at the forefront. A glimpse of the reality of a man who had lived in a time when stakes were higher, when some lines in the sand would only hold if one was prepared to defend them by any means necessary.

It wasn't a mask stripped away. More like a shift in angle to reveal a new facet of a finely cut gemstone.

Taking a deep breath, Lan Wangji stepped inside, and then bent in a deep bow. Behind him, he heard Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue doing the same a half-beat behind, obviously taking their cue from him. "I'm sorry," he said in Middle Chinese, carefully shaping the unfamiliar tones. He wanted to get it, right, to show his sincerity…

And because, after everything that had happened today, it suddenly felt important to draw a line somewhere. To clarify that Wei Wuxian wouldn't be the only one asked to adjust and accommodate. Which, he was ashamed to realize, had been almost exclusively the dynamic up to this point.

They had to do better. *He* had to do better.

And to start… he did not look up, even as the silence stretched longer and longer and he could feel Wei Wuxian's thoughtful gaze on him.

Finally, the silence was broken by a bright laugh, as Wei Wuxian took the coat-wrapped bundle and his sword from Lan Wangji's hands. "Ah… You are forgiven…?" Wei Wuxian said carefully.

Nie Mingjue huffed slightly. "Might want to teach him the simpler version," he murmured. "That's just *weird*."

"…Mn." At the time, going through the set phrases most common in conversation, it had seemed logical and proper to begin with the most grammatically correct and polite version… but hearing the words said aloud, he had to admit that the man had a point.

Straightening, Lan Wangji looked at Wei Wuxian, and was met with a crooked smile, the man finally unfolding his arms. Not his usual sunny grin… but it felt honest and unreserved, even so. There was still a hint of that steel sharpness in his eyes, but it seemed less directed at them than it was… simply no longer hidden away.

Wei Wuxian set the bundle on the counter and unwrapped it. His face immediately brightened when he saw his boots on the pile, and then turned rueful as he looked down and wiggled his toes, sending little ripples across the thin sheet of water still on the floor.

Ah. In the wake of everything, Lan Wangji had completely forgotten about that.

"I will get the mop," he said.

Wen Qing nodded. "Do that. And when you're done…" She sighed. "Nie Mingjue and I will be in the observation room. Come find us when you've finished cleaning up." She raised a hand before he could object. "I know you need to explain this mess to him, and I promise we won't take long. But the three of us need to *talk*."

Ominous. But not unexpected.

Cleaning the lab of the remnants of the bath took slightly longer than he'd intended, largely because – as ever – Wei Wuxian was determined to poke at *everything*. He seemed to find the panel meant to squeeze excess water from the mop to be particularly entertaining, moving the mechanism back and forth to watch how it worked.

It was… somewhat disconcerting, juxtaposing that familiar, cheerful inquisitiveness with steely eyes and a floating sword hovering at Jin Zixun's throat. And yet… it was hardly as if he'd been unaware, intellectually at the least, that Wei Wuxian was no stranger to violence and danger. It was simply that now he understood the extent to which Wei Wuxian *chose* to be the laughing, playful, curious man that he was. And that added insight…

Admirable enough to retain that cheerful resilience from a place of innocence. But to know some of the darkest parts of humanity, and choose that bright outlook despite it? That

reflected a level of strength he found hard to even imagine.

Eventually, however, all that was left was a shine on the floor that was already evaporating away in the dry air of the lab. Packing up mops and bucket to return to their proper place, Lan Wangji hesitated.

Wei Wuxian looked at him knowingly. “In the next room?” he asked in an echo of Lan Wangji’s usual phrasing, tilting his head towards the covered observation window.

…Of course. Hadn’t he just been reflecting that Wei Wuxian was no stranger to conflicts? There was no way he was unaware that the events of this morning had been unplanned and unwelcome – and in need of a response that would require planning.

So Lan Wangji nodded. “I will return soon,” he promised.

Sitting on one of the stools to pull his boots back on now that the floor was dry again, Wei Wuxian chuckled and waved him on.

That nonchalance was a stark contrast to the atmosphere Lan Wangji found in the observation room. Wen Qing was pacing briskly back and forth in the space between the desks, while Nie Mingjue watched her from where he was leaning against the wall, eyes thoughtful.

As soon as the door closed, Wen Qing turned sharply to face him. “We need to get Wei Wuxian out of here,” she said flatly.

The words were like an electric jolt down the length of his spine… and yet, Lan Wangji felt as though the exact same thought had been lurking in the back of his mind ever since the confrontation at the door, waiting only to be articulated. Nor did Nie Mingjue seem the least bit surprised, either.

But… “Doctor?”

Wen Qing’s nostrils flared as she began pacing again, heels muffled on the hard industrial carpeting. “You heard what Lan Xichen said down there,” she said. “Jin Zixun breaching quarantine, violating Wei Wuxian’s privacy and potentially *endangering his life*… was just an overstep. Taking Wei Wuxian’s *only earthly belongings* without his consent wasn’t *theft*, it was *the most reasonable solution*.” Exhaling sharply, she stopped, deliberately shook out taut shoulders, and turned to face them again. “It’s not conscious on their part, I think. And that’s half the problem. So long as Wei Wuxian is in that lab, in their minds he’s *a research subject* first and foremost. Not a person.”

“And since a lot of people have a vested interest in keeping it that way, they’re just going to keep escalating this, as long as he’s in easy reach,” Nie Mingjue rumbled. “Which could get real messy, *real* fast. You saw the look on his face in there. He’s played nice with us so far, in good faith. But the next person to cross a line is likely to regret it.” He paused. “And I’m guessing a cultivator has some pretty creative options when it comes to making people regret their life choices.”

Wen Qing *choked*.

Nie Mingjue chuckled wryly at the stunned look on her face. “Not sure why you’re so surprised, Doctor. He *caught a bullet bare-handed*. When he’d never seen a gun before in his life, no less. It’s been pretty obvious from the beginning that he’s definitely capable of *beyond human* feats. Though I admit, the flying sword? I wasn’t sure about that one until it happened.” He cast a curious glance at Lan Wangji. “Bit surprised you didn’t spot it, Professor. Isn’t cultivator lore kind of your thing?”

Lan Wangji stared at him, stunned.

Because… yes, of course he’d wanted cultivation to be real; he was no more immune to wistful wish-fulfillment fantasies than anyone else, and xianxia novels and movies had long been a secret, guilty pleasure – and not just because they generally featured athletic and attractive men of usually admirable morals in aesthetically pleasing costumes, although he was honest enough to admit that certainly didn’t do anything to reduce the appeal.

But he’d always been careful to draw a strict line between fantasy and fact, long before his own academic research had driven home how different history and even historic folklore were from thrilling fiction that might have been inspired by them but remained fundamentally rooted in the modern world. The folklore was very much something separate and independent, more a lens by which to understand the people of the past than some search for hidden esoteric secrets. A point he’d tried to make *ad nauseum* ever since that first fight after his uncle had discovered the *second* degree he was pursuing.

Oh, he would have thrilled to discover some deep esoteric secret that proved the fantasies true – who would not? But to be honest, he’d been content with the separation of the two. One was his work, beloved and fascinating. The other he could save for play, when he wanted to immerse himself in a world of (attractive and athletic) men who sought to overcome the limitations of the mortal world.

So content that he hadn’t even noticed the reality in front of him.

Suddenly dizzy, Lan Wangji rested a hand on the back of a nearby chair, trying to ground himself amidst the whirl of realization… and then his grip tightened as that thought led inexorably to another. “He drew international attention before, when he was simply a curiosity in the ice.” That he had *survived* the ice would have been earth-shaking enough. But *this*…

“It’s going to be a feeding frenzy, when word gets out,” Wen Qing agreed, and grimaced. “Or worse. Half the project *still* has their heads buried in the sand over the fact that he’s alive. Try to make them wrap their heads around *floating swords*…”

“Half of them are going to try to take him apart just to figure out how it works.” Nie Mingjue finished. “And the other half…” He grimaced. “The project has a lot of powerful people who are used to thinking that they know everything important *to* know about the world. And people like that really don’t like finding out they’re wrong. Some of them would try to tear him apart for defying the way they think the world should work, and just justify it in the name of science.” His lip curled in dry amusement. “Although I doubt Wei Wuxian would let them get that far.”

Lan Wangji looked at him. “Let them,” he echoed.

Nie Mingjue’s smirk widened. “You saw his face when we walked in. Did you see his *hands*?”

“…No,” Wen Qing said slowly, frowning. “His arms were crossed.”

“Exactly.” Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrows. “Something about the position looked odd to me. So I tried it. And if I’m right?” Slowly, deliberately, he unfolded his own arms.

His right hand, which had mostly been hidden behind his elbow, was positioned in a classic meditative mudra, first two fingers held straight while the others curled close to his palm, thumb folded over them.

“A seal gesture?” Lan Wangji murmured. The texts he’d studied occasionally mentioned them, but never in detail. “To control the sword?”

“Could be,” Nie Mingjue said. “But more importantly, *he was hiding it*.” He looked at them, pointedly. “He’s already figured out, we don’t actually know what he’s capable of. And he’s taking steps to keep it that way.”

Oh. *Oh*. “Lingfu,” Lan Wangji breathed. The intricate symbols. The different combinations of writing tools and paper. Careful. Methodical. *Systematic*.

As if he’d been testing the materials available to him, based on some unknown criteria.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure he’s got *actual talismans* literally up his sleeves. Just in case.” Nie Mingjue looked at them. “Personally, I approve. He’s thinking about how to protect himself. But given he’s currently caught in a corner and short on options? I’d really rather he not feel like he has to use those options. Some of them might be explosive.”

Wen Qing closed her mouth, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. “Which brings us back to the original point,” she agreed, visibly deciding to shelve the *cultivator* revelation for a later that would likely involve a glass or two of wine. “We need to get him out of here and out of reach, at the very least until the worst of the hysteria is past and I can hammer in a few unwanted truths.” Her eyes narrowed. “More than that… I want him in a space *he* can control. Where his permission is actually *necessary* rather than an easily overlooked courtesy.”

Lan Wangji nodded, not surprised that she’d also noticed that nuance.

“Of course, that begs the question,” Nie Mingjue said. “Got any ideas about *where* he’d go? Last I checked, we were pretty short on options.”

“We were short on options a week ago, when he first woke up,” Wen Qing corrected. “But circumstances have changed.” She turned. “Lan Wangji. You have a guest room.”

Lan Wangji blinked once. Yes, he did, and Wen Qing was well aware of that, since they’d planned for Wen Yuan to stay there once he’d completed the initial isolation phase of quarantine…

Wait. Did she mean…

"Huh." Nie Mingjue tilted his head slightly. "That's a pretty tidy solution, actually."

He shrugged when Lan Wangji turned to look at him. "Our two goals are to keep the guy quarantined, and to put him somewhere that's not so easy to trespass on, right? That house of yours fits pretty neatly." He grinned. "If nothing else, I can't see Jin Zixun charging into *your* house, no matter how entitled he's feeling. And you'd have indisputable power to kick him and anyone else out. Heck, most of them wouldn't know where to find it in the first place, since it doesn't actually have a listed address."

No, it didn't, since it was part of the historic complex and only accessible by foot. Which was one of the reasons Lan Wangji had been glad to live there, even if it meant regular trips to the campus post office.

Wen Qing nodded. "It's also isolated and quiet. He can stay quarantined without being locked up in one room. And you can't tell me that the language lessons wouldn't be easier with an actual living context to base them on."

Lan Wangji studied Wen Qing for a long moment. "You have thought about this."

She nodded. "It wasn't feasible at the beginning. There were too many variables. I'd planned to bring it up once people calmed down and accepted that this was going to take a while, but…" She grimaced.

Lan Wangji nodded slowly. Under normal circumstances, he would be disinclined to accept a roommate; he preferred his space. But he was not wholly against the concept. And Wen Qing was correct that Wei Wuxian's language skills would progress more rapidly in a genuinely immersive environment.

And… he liked Wei Wuxian. More importantly, Wei Wuxian seemed to like him, although the situation meant that could easily be a matter of necessity as opposed to genuine preference. But they could share space comfortably, at least. Which was likely one of the variables that Wen Qing had mentioned.

However. "I am not a physician," he reminded her. After all, one of the primary reasons Wei Wuxian had remained in the lab was the need to closely monitor his health.

But Wen Qing shrugged. "I'm fairly certain we're past the point of needing to worry about a sudden acute crisis, which was my primary worry before. My biggest concern now is making sure he doesn't get sick, which is one of the reasons I was thinking about this in the first place."

"Really?" Nie Mingjue asked. "Because… no offense, Doctor, but it seems like a pretty risky move from that standpoint."

"Really." Without waiting for a response, Wen Qing began pacing again. "I'm worried about diseases. Which means I need to keep his immune system strong, first and foremost."

She turned sharply to face them again. “Do you know what depresses the immune system?” She began listing points off on her fingers. “Lack of sunlight depresses the immune system. Lack of fresh air depresses the immune system. Lack of exercise depresses the immune system. Confinement depresses the immune system, not having control over your surroundings depresses the immune system, isolation depresses the immune system, *do I need to keep going*?”

Lan Wangji’s breath caught. Yes, he’d been less than comfortable with the situation as it stood. But his focus had been on the inherent discomfort, the power imbalance, the *unfairness* of it. He hadn’t considered that it might be actively detrimental to Wei Wuxian’s health.

In which case, his choice was obvious. Especially since he had no particular aversion or concerns. Save one. “Where will Wen Yuan stay, then?”

Wen Qing hesitated. “Would you still have room for him?”

Possibly. It would likely require reorganizing his office space. And some shopping; he’d never had need of an air mattress before. But doable. “You think his presence will be important?”

“It’ll make the language learning easier,” Nie Mingjue said. “And from a security standpoint, better to minimize the amount of back-and-forth.” He looked at Wen Qing.

Her shoulders dropped slightly. “I think it could be crucial,” she said quietly. “Because another thing that depresses the immune system? Is *grief*.” She closed her eyes. “Everything else, we can avoid or ameliorate. But… eventually, he is going to learn that everyone he ever knew – family, friends, even enemies – is dead. Their children are dead. Their great-great-*grandchildren* are dead, and have been dead so long it would take a miracle to even find their names, let alone their graves. And there’s nothing we can do to cushion that. His entire *world* is gone, and there’s no going back to it.”

Nie Mingjue exhaled heavily. “That’s… yeah. That’d be a lot.”

Lan Wangji nodded slowly. It was not as if he was unaware of the magnitude of what Wei Wuxian had lost; it was why he’d delayed speaking of the matter, after all. But hearing it spelled out so starkly… “You believe Wen Yuan’s presence would be beneficial?”

“Kids are good for that sort of thing,” Nie Mingjue pointed out. “Get you thinking about the present, rather than the past, if only to keep them from running out in front of something.”

“And if nothing else, the more support network he can get before the moment comes, the better,” Wen Qing said briskly.

Both true. Which only left one complication. “I do not know Uncle can be convinced to approve such a transfer.” On *so* many levels.

Wen Qing smiled grimly. “As it happens, I don’t plan to ask permission. *Or* forgiveness.”

Startled, Lan Wangji looked at Nie Mingjue.

The man nodded. “I’m the head of security. The safety of the project members is my responsibility, and that includes Wei Wuxian. And since it’s the project *itself* that’s putting him in danger right now…” He shrugged, and then leveled a serious look at Lan Wangji. “You’re not obligated to help. I know this is a pretty extreme step.”

It was. And terrifying. But. “It is the right step.”

Wen Qing released a slightly shaky breath. “All right, then. This is what we were planning…”

OMAKE:

Lan Xichen: Wen Yuan gets access to Yiling Laozu, and not our distinguished researchers?
Wen Qing: Unlike your distinguished researchers, Wen Yuan actually remembers that Yiling Laozu *is not his name*.
(A line I desperately wanted to get into the fic itself, but there was never really a good opportunity. Darn it.)

Wei Wuxian: (Looks at modern clothes) “I mean, normally I’m happy to own my own shamelessness, but…”

NOTES:

Fun thought! At Mount Dafan, Lan Wangji sends Bichen across the mountain destroying several hundred nets… which means Bichen was guided somehow. So either you can go with “spiritual swords have a consciousness and can act independently” (which seems like a step beyond simply sealing, which in MDZS is something that *only* Suibian is known to have done among the cast, and in an earlier conversation Wei Wuxian comments is the sort of legendary achievement that only a cultivator in their eighties *might* accomplish), or cultivators can project their own consciousness into a sword to guide it even at some distance – implying they can “see” through their sword. Which honestly sounds like an awesome tactic to use when scouting a potentially dangerous situation…

Most of my information about ancient Chinese vaccinations comes from here: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3407399/

There are conflicting accounts, but thus far this is the source with the best discussion of sources I’ve found.

Yes, Wen Yuan *absolutely* wants to make sure Mo Xuanyu gets to find out *who* exactly he was helping with his cosplay fashion advice. Preferably with Wen Yuan *right there* to see the

look on his face…

…also, yes, logically it should have taken much longer to get that outfit together than one week, and I should have saved that for a later scene. But Lan Wangji refused to give up a chance to give Wei Wuxian All The Nice Things.

Bath beans: from what I've found, historically the pods of the Chinese honey locust tree (*Gleditsia sinensis*) have been used as detergent in China. It also sounds like they would use perfumes mixed in as well, so I built on that…

Mudra is an Indian term for the ritual hand positions ("seals," which is a literal translation of mudra) that we often see characters using in anime and xianxia; so far as I can tell, the practice originated with Vedic religions, spread to China along with Buddhism, and then diffused to other traditions… but since they're a classic cultivation thing, might as well use them!

While the Lan Wangji of this fic copes with it far better (in part because he's in his thirties and has vastly more life experience, not to mention a far less sheltered and simplistic worldview)… I personally headcanon that part of Lan Wangji's reaction to Wei Wuxian after the first Burial Mounds stint had in part to do with the fact that, for all he'd cursed Wei Wuxian's refusal to be serious in Cloud Recesses, he'd never stopped to wonder what a deadly serious Wei Wuxian would be like. He was used to Wei Wuxian using humor to get through even deadly situations, and was *not* prepared to deal with the fact that Wei Wuxian is terrifying when he's genuinely angry. And so the new Wei Wuxian surely had to be the fault of the resentful energy, rather than a side of Wei Wuxian Lan Wangji had never seen outside of punching Jin Zixuan. (In fact, the novel expressly shows Wei Wuxian discovering for himself that he *can* be that coldly, brutally angry… in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Lotus Pier, *before* the golden core transfer or any attempt to handle resentful energy.)

I cover this in *Bitter Plants Bearing Sweet Fruit*, but while I'm sure Wei Wuxian's sleep schedule is intended to convey "party animal" (and fit his Spooky Hero aesthetic), the fact of the matter is that in ancient times, it's unlikely he'd have that many people to party *with*, because prior to the industrial revolution and electric lighting, aligning your activity to the sun was a matter of *necessity* more than preference. So what *does* he do when he stays up to the wee hours of the morning?

Personal head canon: that's his private time. That's when he can train at his own level without worrying about Madam Yu or setting off Jiang Cheng's insecurities. That's when he can meditate without being interrupted by his responsibilities as first disciple. And, yes, time to poke around and explore and get up to mischief.

Not to mention that it's a much more practical sleep schedule for a lifestyle that includes *night hunts* than the Lan system.

Speaking of. It's worth remembering that in the novel, Wei Wuxian's mischief is, in almost every case, strategic. His "impulsiveness" is always calculated to serve a purpose. He always has a specific goal for the chaos he causes. *This includes about 90% of his flirting with Lan Wangji.* (And 100% of his flirting with anyone else.) I think people tend to be uncomfortable with it because we're culturally primed to see it as a negative trait (which may be tied to that

annoying "intelligence isn't heroic" bias), but Wei Wuxian is *sly*. He's cunning, he's tricky, he's perfectly comfortable manipulating people to bait or lure them into doing what he wants, and he knows darned well that charm is a *verb*. And uses it if it's an option (often it isn't).

All of which goes to say: Wei Wuxian can be gleefully teasing and having a huge amount of fun with it, *while also* calculating how to fluster Lan Wangji out of the room so he can whistle up some ghosts to interrogate for more information on his situation *at the same time*. He is talented that way.

And if you're thinking it's OOC for Wei Wuxian to wait in one room for a week, a reminder: *canon*, he kept his head down and out of trouble for days during the Wen indoctrination camp; he was under orders not to draw attention and he *followed* those orders. He only acted when there was a crisis that demanded action. (Something CQL apparently changed, which I find annoying because it undermines just how much self-control he has and the extent of strategy involved in his "impulsiveness.") Likewise, he only breaks out of Mo Xuanyu's room after he's learned everything he can from the contents, spent hours meditating to familiarize himself with his new body, *and* has overheard that there are sect cultivators visiting, giving him a prime opportunity to test if public humiliation will be enough to satisfy the terms of the summoning ritual. And then, when that doesn't work, he wanders around for a bit, and then goes back and meditates some more. So much for the "bad at meditating/doesn't like to meditate" fanon!

…actually, ironically, I think Wei Wuxian is pretty much the *only* character we ever actually *see* meditating…

Empathy requiring an outside party to pull yourself out of it makes for an excellent device at the point in the story where it's introduced; it raises the stakes of Empathy with A'Qing's ghost, gives the kids and especially Jin Ling an important role to play, and builds rapport between Wei Wuxian and the kids through trust. It's also a *major plot hole*. How would Wei Wuxian have figured it out? I can't see him doing it during the Sunshot Campaign, so did he only figure it out after hiding out in the Burial Mounds with the Wens? So… my take is, having an assistant to pull you out *helps* and is definitely a good idea… but it's actually not strictly necessary.

(Assuming, of course, that he invented the method. It might well be an established cultivation method, although that makes the treatment of his own cultivation as somehow "demonic" even more facepalmy… which could well be the point. The novel only says that every clan has their own technique for communicating with spirits, and that Empathy is Wei Wuxian's specialty. However, for the purposes of this fic, I'm saying that he created it.)

And given that it's canon that Wei Wuxian can hear ghosts that others don't, and can chat them up for information? I really want a story where he accidentally becomes a spymaster because people gossip and a lot of ghosts are fundamentally bored people with no one to talk to…

As for the angry ghost? It's *canon* that unless Wei Wuxian has accustomed a fierce corpse to working with him, their response to seeing him is to go *eep* and lurch in any other direction. As one meta-writer put it (sorry, I've lost the link), Wei Wuxian is such a high-level necromancer that he has a perpetual low-grade Turn Undead aura!

…it also makes for an absolutely hilarious mental image.

"Grrr, argh, we are fierce corpses, fear us… *Whoableep*, that's Yiling Laozu, play dead!"
"But we're already dead…?"
"*Play deader*!"

Which is actually interesting, because a lot of fanworks paint Wei Wuxian as being able to whistle up an army whenever he wants, when in fact he would have had to build up any undead he worked with over time, *or* be working with dead who already have grudges. Which is probably what made the fight in Nightless City so devastating; given the location, the dead he called up there would likely have been *Wen disciples and civilians killed during the siege*, and therefore they would have been predisposed to view the other sects as their enemies.

A related aside: I've seen some people claim that Wei Wuxian's cultivation messes with spirits entering the reincarnation cycle. However, outside of the fact that *all* exorcisms mess with reincarnation if liberation isn't an option, there is *nothing* in the novel to support this, and indirect evidence against it. As far as I can tell, those claims are based on more general xianxia tropes about modao, but not only does MXTX have a history of playing fast and loose with said tropes, there's actually a strong argument to be made that Wei Wuxian's cultivation *is not modao*.

No, I'm not kidding. According to someone who can read the original Chinese, the term "modao/demonic cultivation" is used *once* in the entire novel… in the first chapter, as a title drop, when Wei Wuxian reflects – rather sarcastically – that people *called* him "Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation."

Anyone who knows the big twist of the novel knows that that's a red flag right there!

Outside of that, the only people who call what Wei Wuxian does "demonic" are people who *don't know anything about the path he created*. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, calls it guidao/ghost path. More significantly, *Xue Yang* calls it guidao – and let's be real, Xue Yang would be *thrilled* to call what he does *demonic*. So if he's *also* calling it guidao? I take that as a very significant hint to *pay attention* to the distinction.

Honestly, I think it's awesome. The whole point of the story is subverting expectations, so is it really such a shock to find out that the title itself has invisible air quotes on it? After all, from a certain point of view it's not wrong: the story is about someone who *was called* the grandmaster of demonic cultivation…

Regarding Lan Xichen…

I think I'm hard on the man in part because in a similar situation, *that would be me*. I don't have a lot of social courage, I hate conflict, I cringe at the first hint of anger, I want people to *get along*. I admire those with the courage to stand their ground; I have doubts about my own ability to do so. (Though I'd like to think that I would try.)

However. Lan Xichen also, canonically, does not have a strong moral compass – he flat out admits to Lan Wangji at one point that he's never really put much thought into right versus

wrong. He also, canonically, is unwilling to stand up to people.

He's also one of those characters who doesn't hold up well in a careful reread of the novel.

Lots of digital ink has been spilled about the Yunping Temple Rant, so I won't delve into that here (although I do have my own take on what I see as a fundamental dishonesty in how he presents the events of Nightless City and after). And people have pointed out the fact that he just laughs off Nie Mingjue taking a third of the prey on Phoenix Mountain when everyone ganged up on Wei Wuxian for doing the exact same thing. As well as his willingness to give lip service to "maybe he had a point" but refusal to actually follow up when no one else agrees.

Instead, consider this: when Jin Guangyao *flat-out confirms* Wei Wuxian's accusations that Jin Guangshan is maneuvering to be the next Wen Ruohan, then follows up with the protest of, "But how rude of him to make me say it, especially because it's true!" Lan Wangji objects to the insinuations against Wei Wuxian – and Lan Xichen shuts him down with that "his heart has changed" line. Which comes across as *very strange* when you consider that there's no indication that Lan Xichen has had anything to do with Wei Wuxian since Cloud Recesses, while Lan Wangji's arguments with Wei Wuxian are famous enough to shape the public perception of him even when he actively sides with Wei Wuxian *thirteen years later*. Lan Xichen was even encouraging Lan Wangji to go talk to Wei Wuxian at Phoenix Mountain! So why is Lan Xichen acting like he knows Wei Wuxian better than Lan Wangji? Especially when his statement is a *complete non sequitur* to the point at hand?

Consider this as well: at Phoenix Mountain, Lan Xichen compliments Jin Guangyao for gracefully salvaging the party. Which he pretty much accomplished by throwing Wei Wuxian under the bus. When Lan Xichen was fully aware that Nie Mingjue had done the exact same thing that Wei Wuxian was being excoriated for.

With that in mind? I don't think Lan Xichen actually believed what he said about Wei Wuxian.* He just didn't want Lan Wangji's *socially inconvenient honesty* to mess things up. So he said whatever would work to smooth things over.

(*: Rather, I don't think he believed it *at the time*. But it would be in character and psychologically consistent for him to then be absolutely certain after the fact that what he said was true and justified. Convincing yourself that what's convenient for you must be true is very much a thing.)

To be fair, I'm of the camp that feels that, at least in the novel, Lan Xichen has *no clue* that Lan Wangji actually loves Wei Wuxian prior to Nightless City. So he would have seen himself as giving Lan Wangji a graceful out from obligatory Honorable Honesty that *just happened* to be socially convenient for Lan Xichen's friend.

In addition: in the situation in this story? Lan Xichen is surrounded by loud, stubborn people – many of whom are far older and better established than he is – he's not actually involved in working with Wei Wuxian's care directly, and he's getting no support from Lan Qiren, who is still in "pretend the problem will just go away" mode.

As for Lan Qiren himself… I honestly think that Lan Qiren's reported reputation about his teaching skills is meant, in the novel, as our first serious hint that one of the big themes of the novel is that reputation *cannot be taken at face value*. The man is a terrible teacher, and the novel *calls him out on it*. He's also inflexible, hypocritical, and prone to flat-out refusing to acknowledge anything he doesn't like, even if it's the truth.

I'm planning on some redemption for him in this fic… but at this point? He's not only inflexible and in denial, but he lived through the Cultural Revolution. Politics getting involved in academia is a *trauma trigger* for the guy.

Problem is, even when you have legitimate trauma behind your actions, it doesn't prevent the damage your actions do…

Chapter 6: Lines Drawn

Chapter Summary

> Wen Qing lays down the law. Wei Wuxian discovers chili oil. And Lan Wangji realizes he overlooked something important.

Chapter Notes

> Yes, I had the *Mission Impossible* theme song on repeat in my head when I wrote the first two scenes. The difference being that I was giggling about it. Sometimes one must simply embrace absurdity!
>
> (I also invite you to imagine Wei Wuxian discovering *Mission Impossible*...)

It was a beautiful afternoon; the sun was shining bright and clear overhead, pleasant rather than harsh. The warmth radiating up from the sunbaked footpath was a welcome relief from overly air-conditioned labs and offices where all too often the settings were determined by men wearing black woolen suits in high summer. Birds were singing in one of the nearby stands of trees, although she couldn't see anything beyond a vague sense of flitting motion in the shadows under the leaves.

Wen Qing made herself focus on those little details. Because if she thought about anything else, she might very easily throw up.

This was taking things so much farther than simply being the one drawing a line and saying *no*.

But she was a doctor, first and foremost. What was the point of swearing an oath to do no harm, if she didn't act to *prevent* harm happening right in front of her?

And she'd tried to do things the proper way, going through the right channels. But the problem with the "proper" method was that it assumed, in fact *relied on*, the assumption that others would respond in kind.

Drawing a line in the sand didn't do any good when there was someone else blithely inviting people to step over it instead.

At this point, *something* had to be done, and she intended to do it.

Briskly, she swiped her ID card and stepped through the door, nodding to Meng Yao at the security desk. “Any problems today?”

“Less than I expected, Doctor Wen,” Meng Yao said with a wry smile. “I suppose it helps that the usual suspects are all currently dealing with an existential crisis… and probably getting very drunk.” The smile became a little more crooked. “I also suspect the boss disabled certain ID cards’ access on the door for the duration.” He nodded to her. “He did say I should expect you…?” He let the statement trail away into a question, obviously curious about the change in her routine.

She didn’t even have to feign her flash of temper. “After this morning’s *fiasco*? Jin Zixun breached the quarantine, and he spends every night and most of his days at parties and bars! Luckily the exposure was brief, but mitigation and preventative treatment is a must after that.”

Which was absolutely and utterly true. Even if, for all practical purposes, the best she could do with regards to mitigation was monitoring for symptoms and vitamin supplements.

Honestly, she probably should have started supplements sooner, especially given that the man was confined indoors. She’d decided against it mostly because without access to a blood test, she couldn’t be sure that intervention wouldn’t harm more than it helped. And blood tests were still not an option.

Not least because a blood test was supposed to be taken when the patient was fasting. She was *not* going to withhold food from a man who was already slightly underweight without explanation or his explicit agreement, just because she was anxious.

Still, vitamin C, at least, was about as harmless as anyone could ask. Even if she would prefer that he get it in the form of actual *food* – see aforementioned underweight status – it wouldn’t hurt to put him on a supplement, if they could convince him to take it.

However, when Meng Yao looked at her bag and said, “So you brought your equipment? Do you need help carrying it?” she didn’t bother correcting his assumption, just shook her head.

“It’s not heavy, just a little bulky,” she said. “And you shouldn’t leave your post, even if Mister Nie did change the ID access.” Then she blinked. “Actually, why are you still on duty? Isn’t it Nie Zhonghui’s shift?”

Meng Yao smiled ruefully. “I volunteered to cover while the boss gets him briefed on everything that’s happened. It’s… rather a lot, after all. And…” His face fell. “I still feel like this was my fault.”

Wen Qing huffed. It *was* his fault, technically. Security officers were Nie Mingjue’s responsibility. Even if Lan Xichen had formally given permission, by proper order he should have notified Nie Mingjue and let *him* pass the new instructions on to his own people. To say nothing of just handing off permission to *Jin Zixun*.

Well. Hopefully tomorrow’s meeting would drive a few hard truths home.

“Trust me, your contribution to that mess was minimal,” she said dryly, and then nodded briskly and started down the hallway, not wanting to be drawn any farther into the conversation.

In a way, she felt bad. She understood Nie Mingjue’s reasoning for keeping his own people in the dark about what they were planning; they were definitely moving in a *very* grey area, legally if not ethically. The last thing they needed was to drag Nie Mingjue’s subordinates in. And on a ruthlessly practical level, given the amount of pressure the security officers were facing, they were definitely better off keeping things on a need-to-know basis. Especially since Meng Yao *had* caved to social pressure once already.

So instead, he was going to be providing her a cover story of sorts.

She drew in a deep breath but didn’t slow down. From here on out, she was on a soft timer of sorts. Because if too much time passed between when she entered and when they saw her leave, that could potentially lead to trouble.

Which was probably why Nie Mingjue had agreed to Meng Yao watching the door. Between the changing of the shifts, her timeline would get harder to follow.

…and now she had the *Mission Impossible* theme song stuck in her head. Again. *Augh*. She was going to *strangle* Nie Mingjue for humming it while they’d been planning.

On the plus side, aggravation was vastly preferable to anxiety, a lesson she’d learned as a surgeon. Hands steady, she knocked on the door to the lab. “It’s Wen Qing,” she said briskly.

After a moment’s pause, the door opened—

—and had she seen a flicker of red light just before the latch turned? Surely not…

Then she recalled Nie Mingjue’s dry amusement, and caught herself. Because *cultivator*. If he could make a sword fly, why *not* put some kind of protections on the door?

It… was an odd kind of relief. She was a doctor; violence wasn’t really something she was used to thinking about, on a personal level, but she’d seen enough victims of violence pass through her care to viscerally appreciate the thought of someone who was willing to draw their own lines to defend themselves, with the necessary skills to back those lines up.

And she was going to *hound* Lan Wangji until the man coughed up a list of what some of those skills supposedly were, because right now the only source she had to go on were xianxia shows.

“Hello!” Wei Wuxian said brightly, stepping back to allow her into the lab – although she saw his eyes flicker to the side, widening and then narrowing when he noted the absence of the usual guard. And when she looked more closely at him, there was a thoughtful look in his eyes. Clearly, he knew something was happening.

How much had Lan Wangji told him? Likely not very much, given the limitations of communicating. But it would help if Wei Wuxian had some sense of what was coming.

Then she looked again, because as previously noted: doctor, not *dead*.

Wei Wuxian laughed, posing dramatically, and Wen Qing huffed at him, but smiled despite herself. The man looked good, he *knew* he looked good, and he was comfortable enough with himself to be silly about it. There were far worse ways to respond.

And he did definitely look good. Lan Wangji had done a good job with the new clothes. The dark, dramatic colors suited him. Rather more importantly, he did *not* look like Yiling Laozu, the relic from the distant past frozen in ice.

Although he was definitely going to draw attention regardless, and not just because he was a tall, fit, gorgeous man in striking clothes. Those clothes were meant to deal with the chill of the lab; the minute he stepped outside, he was going to stand out as distinctly overdressed for the warm summer afternoon.

Fortunately that was one problem that was easy enough to solve, even if the solution was rather counterintuitive. Reaching into the bag, she pulled out a white lab coat – one of Lan Wangji's spares – and held it out.

That, at least, would hide the striking clothes, and it wasn't that unusual to see students and teachers hurrying across the campus with white coats over long sleeves; aggressive air conditioning was practically universal in the labs. Wearing a lab coat outside the labs was technically a violation of their purpose – but again, it wasn't that uncommon to just leave it on at the end of the day, or as a status symbol of sorts.

Thankfully, they were in the relatively cooler mountain climate of Cloud Recesses. Trying to pull this off in the swelteringly humid lowlands didn't bear thinking about.

That took care of the clothing. She couldn't do anything about the man's face, since there was apparently a tragic shortage of horn-rimmed spectacles with the magical power to make someone *not* the most gorgeous person ever seen…

…and if she was misquoting the *Wonder Woman* movie, then she was definitely freaking out more than she'd been willing to admit to herself.

Not that she didn't have good reason to freak out. Technically speaking… if this wasn't kidnapping, it was *damn close*.

Of course, if they were going to talk technicalities, she was "kidnapping" the man to rescue him from what was – technically – false imprisonment. With his cooperation – although she couldn't say consent, not when she couldn't explain anything to him in a meaningful way.

This is such a ridiculous, unnecessary mess*!*

Well. Since they were committed to this nonsense, there was one detail left that would *absolutely* give Wei Wuxian away as Yiling Laozu. Meeting the man's eyes, she reached one hand over her own head, miming a tugging motion.

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows rose at that. But he reached up and pulled the red ribbon out of his hair, releasing it from the high ponytail and letting it tumble down to lie against his back.

That definitely helped, but… pursing her lips, Wen Qing pantomimed braiding, muscle memory from when she'd worn her own hair long guiding the movements. Because no one was going to leave hair that long loose if they were working in a lab.

Of course, no one had hair that long, *period*, except for maybe celebrities and women living in rural villages that took the old customs about grooming more seriously. But one step at a time.

And while he was doing that… With a deep breath, Wen Qing toed off her sharp-heeled pumps. She'd never been a fan of high heels – it had always seemed pointless to risk a twisted ankle or shortened ligaments for a fashion that was fundamentally developed to make someone's legs look sexier. But she'd learned that the added bit of height made a difference when dealing with far too many men… especially with the added psychological edge of the dangerous-sounding click they made against the floor.

Dangerous-sounding and *distinctive*, which was not what she needed at the moment. So she reached into her bag to pull out the ballet flats she preferred when actually *working* rather than posturing, slipping them on and tucking the pumps away.

When she looked up, she saw that Wei Wuxian was watching her thoughtfully, lips pursed ever so slightly. Obviously, he'd realized that something very odd was going on.

Then, with quick, practiced motions, he used the ribbon to tie the braid off – and immediately tucked it inside the lab coat, where no one would be able to tell at a glance just *how* long it was in comparison to the norm.

Yes, he *absolutely* knew that they were up to something.

Shifting his sword around until it was also hidden under the coat, Wei Wuxian looked at her and raised his eyebrows pointedly. In response, Wen Qing held out her bag, nodding to the pile of neatly folded robes on a corner of the table.

While he packed those away, she quickly gathered up the scattered papers, notebooks and writing tools he'd acquired, tucking them into the case where she usually carried her own notepads and documents. Given the morning's revelations, her nerves jittered a little at handling the intricate lingfu – but she was not going to leave any of them behind, either. *Especially* if Nie Mingjue was right about them actually working.

Once she'd finished, she glanced around to make sure they hadn't missed anything. But all that was left were odds and ends that had accumulated over the past week: the cot and blankets, the electric kettle, the screens and chamber pot.

Wei Wuxian was waiting, her bag slung over his own shoulder – either out of a sense of chivalry, or because he wasn't interested in handing over all his earthly belongings to *anyone*. Which was perfectly reasonable.

Wen Qing drew in a breath, and braced herself.

Then she opened the door, stepped out – and turned, beckoning Wei Wuxian to follow.

He expected it – he had to, since her actions had made it obvious that she was going to take him somewhere. Even so, his eyes widened slightly, and he hesitated at the door itself.

And that… stung. Not because he didn't trust her; he *did*, at least to a reasonable extent, or he wouldn't be following along like this. But it drove the point home that no matter what her intentions for keeping him isolated in the lab, from his perspective he'd been a prisoner this whole time, never once getting to leave the room he'd first woken up in.

But the hesitation only lasted a half-second, barely more than a stutter in his stride, and then he was in the hallway, looking around with open and shameless curiosity.

"This way," Wen Qing told him, starting down the hallway for the stairs.

She had to look back once or twice to make sure the man was actually following her; Wei Wuxian's steps were ghostly silent even in the echo chamber of the hallway, as the man followed close on her own footsteps despite his distraction.

Then, as they stepped into the stairwell and she saw his eyes flicker up and down, sweeping their surroundings, she suddenly realized that *distraction* was the wrong word entirely. Because that wide-eyed interest was… not a mask, there was nothing feigned about it. But even as he looked around with that bright-eyed curiosity, he was studying their surroundings, wary and watchful.

No doubt about it; he *knew* she was at best skirting the very edge of the rules here.

When they reached the ground floor, habit almost turned her feet towards the conference rooms and the front entrance. Checking herself, she instead headed the other direction, towards the back, and the utility door.

The building had more than one entrance, of course. Given the security concerns that had surrounded the project even before Wei Wuxian woke, Nie Mingjue had taken the expedient of disabling all of the public entrances except for the front door, to make it easier to monitor who was coming and going. The utility door by the loading dock, however, had no ID lock to disable; it required an actual, physical key to unlock. A key that very few people actually had direct access to, since the door was rarely ever used.

But that was to get through the door from the *outside*. Like the door of the lab, fire codes required that the door *couldn't* be locked against anyone trying to get *out*.

The only catch was that the utility door had no windows, nothing to let her see if anyone was outside… but they'd planned for that.

Pulling out her phone, Wen Qing sent a simple question mark. A few moments later, Nie Mingjue sent a thumbs-up emoji.

Well then.

Slipping the phone back into her pocket, Wen Qing gave herself a moment to breathe. Strange that she could feel so terrified and so *stupid* at one and the same time.

Because this was *ridiculous*! She should not be here, going through machinations practically *worthy* of the stupid *Mission Impossible* theme song, trying to smuggle a *full-grown man* across campus without anyone noticing! This felt like some kind of… living satire!

And yet…

The whole situation inside the project had proven far more volatile than she'd imagined. Add in the dark worries that Nie Mingjue had confided about the protests and those blasted bullets…

Well. She'd rather be too paranoid than not paranoid *enough*.

And that meant she had to keep the ticking clock in mind. Huffing, she pushed the door open and stepped outside.

As promised, the concrete loading dock was empty, with no one in sight. Good. They could take the back paths to circle around and cross the campus from a different angle, away from the lab building and along a path that would keep Wei Wuxian as distant from exposure to the summer student population as possible…

Behind her, Wei Wuxian drew in a sharp breath.

He was staring at the trees, wide-eyed. As she watched, he closed his eyes and just… breathed, face turned up to the sun.

Wen Qing hesitated. At the back of her mind, the urge to *go-go*-go was screaming at her…

But Wei Wuxian had been trapped in that lab for a week… and in ice for centuries.

I can give him a moment.

Ooh. *Warm.* Stuck in that room, he'd put the persistent bit of nip in the air out of mind; after several years pretty much living in a cave in the Burial Mounds, a little chill was hardly going to phase him!

But finally coming out into a bright sunny warm spot? He wanted to curl up in it like a lazy cat and just let the warmth soak in.

Opening his eyes again, Wei Wuxian blinked a few times to help them adjust, and allowed himself a breath of relief. The strange buzzy light bars in that room hadn't just been a strange color, they'd *flickered*, like an unsteady candle except far faster. Trying to read or write in that light had consistently led to tired eyes and an aching head after a while. The warm, steady sunlight was a welcome change.

And! Green things!

Not that the Burial Mounds had been *short* on plant life, exactly. After all, macabre as it was, the place wasn't exactly lacking for fertilizer. But with so much ambient resentment, plants often grew strangely. And resentful energy had a way of leaching color from its surroundings that had nothing to do with light or leaves.

Which made sense. Resentful energy was, at its core, pain and anger and grief and hate. None of which were the sort of thing that put one in the mood to pay attention to birdsong and sunshine and flowers! And when all of that was just drifting in the air… well.

He drew in another deep breath rich with the smell of sunbaked stone and growing things, and then looked at Wen Qing.

And blinked. She was waiting at the edge of the odd flat platform they'd come out on, anxious energy obvious in the way she was already half-turned onto the smaller of two paths, one leading away into the trees… but she was watching him with a small smile, eyes soft.

Take your time. I can wait.

He had to smile a little at that. Really, now that he thought about it, Wen Qing reminded him a great deal of Lan Yi. Brusque, ruthlessly practical… and beneath it all, a bone-deep, core-deep *kindness*.

Really, if Lan Yi ever met the woman, she'd probably adopt Wen Qing on the spot. Of course, then it would be *both* of them ganging up on him, so probably best to avoid that. Even if it would be hilarious.

However. Kind as her patience was, it was fairly obvious that they couldn't afford to linger. He might be unaware of the details of the factional conflict he'd somehow gotten pulled into, but it was pretty obvious Wen Qing was breaking with *someone's* orders to do this. Which meant getting caught would probably be bad. So… He grinned at her and waved a hand. *Onwards!*

After all, he was perfectly capable of gawking and walking at the same time. He was talented that way.

Even with so much to stare at. Starting with the path itself!

Not that it looked so strange at first glance, made up of large, smooth paving stones fitted together in an irregular, interconnected pattern. But the stones were almost unnaturally smooth and even, scarcely a corner poking up to stub a toe on, and no roughness or protrusions he could feel even with the worn-thin state of his boot soles. And there was *nothing* natural about the sharp, straight edges of the path, each side a perfect, even line as if someone had laid the stones in place, and then drawn a sword and simply sliced the excess away.

Which, granted, wasn't *impossible* with a sufficient infusion of qi. Although it still tended to be hard on the sword. Still, it seemed a rather unnecessary extra step. Especially when the stones were fixed firmly in place with… actually, he wasn't sure *what* the pale material was. Some kind of hardened white sand?

Come to think of it, the other path – wider, perhaps meant for carts that wouldn't fit on this narrower route? – had been made entirely of a similar material, just with larger stones mixed into the sand and darker in color, with a sheen to it that made him suspect bitumen had been used as well.

Really, it was an impressive system; if the hardened sand really was as durable as it seemed, it would be an excellent way to avoid ruts that could damage a misaligned wheel, not to mention cutting down considerably on mud when the rains came, and far less bumpy than cobblestones! It made him wonder why they hadn't used it for the footpath as well, since it was hard to imagine it would be more expensive or demanding than the finely fitted stones.

Then again, the hardened sand-and-gravel mix was not exactly aesthetically appealing. And this trail winding under the trees, dappled gold against blue-green shadows and smelling of summer greenery, curving in places seemingly for the sake of it, was *definitely* laid out with aesthetics in mind.

Although, speaking of aesthetics…

He tilted his head slightly to eye the strange buildings looming overhead in scattered glimpses through the trees. Overall, they didn't look *that* strange, all things considered… but he'd seen smaller *palaces* than just one of those structures.

Granted, he'd definitely seen *larger* palaces as well. Thank you, Lanling Jin. *Not*.

Except that he *had* been to Jinlintai, so he had a fairly good idea of the sort of modifications needed to keep buildings that size and scale even remotely livable, and none of them were in evidence. That closed-off room he'd been in should have been *stifling*, not chilly – especially since it was obvious that the season was moving on towards midsummer, now that he was outside.

Not to mention that the aesthetic of the interior really did not match the exterior at all. Even the underlying structure of the buildings didn't quite ring true. As if someone had gone to some effort to give this place the *look* of a sect or temple complex, but only on a surface level.

Perhaps he'd been thinking in the wrong direction. Rather than exiles or refugees fleeing the wars of the central lands (or a hidden enclave of very strange immortals!), perhaps these people had come *to* the area from another land, and were trying to blend in. That would at least explain why they seemed unaware of the recent war…

But the ghosts implied they'd been in this area for at least fifty years. *Augh*. Now his head hurt!

Ignoring his plight (not that he was stupid enough to make a show of his thoughts, but still!), Wen Qing continued along the path through the trees for a short distance, ignoring several branch paths that split off in several directions. Eventually, however, she did turn onto one of those paths, following it back towards the buildings they'd been skirting around. Just before they left the sheltering screen of the trees, however, she hesitated for a moment, drawing in a deep breath before squaring her shoulders resolutely.

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. Oh, he knew that reaction. There was nothing quite like the moment before you walked into a town that you knew was in enemy hands.

Although, he was *mostly* certain that this wasn't actually enemy territory, at least as far as Wen Qing was concerned. Then again, he'd had to walk through Lotus Pier when Madam Yu – and later, Jiang Cheng – had been in a *temper*. There honestly wasn't that much of a difference.

Actually, the latter was probably *more* hazardous, now that he thought about it. Your odds of being noticed and stopped got a lot higher when people *expected* to see you there.

Still, the basic principle didn't really change: head up, eyes forward, move with the crowd rather than against it, and walk like you had somewhere to be. So when Wen Qing stepped out of the trees, he moved with her, steps steady and confident as they passed through the shadows between two of the oversized buildings and out into sunlight again.

Sunlight and *people*, who he watched with interest even as he was careful to keep pace with Wen Qing's confident stride. Rather a lot of people, actually. Not enough to really make for a crowd, even by the standards of, say, Yiling's small market, but definitely enough to make the broad open space feel lively; mostly pairs and small groups strolling along the broad, stone-paved paths, with faster-moving singletons dodging around them as they overtook the slower-paced groups. Interestingly, most of them seemed to be moving in the same general direction…

Thoughtfully, Wei Wuxian glanced up, trying to gauge the angle of the light. It was a bit tricky, but if he recalled the time display from the room accurately, this wasn't too far off the time Lan Wangji usually shared the evening meal with him. And… yes, the color and angle of the light was consistent with late afternoon in the summer, although the shadows seemed deeper and the air cooler than he would have expected…

Ah. There; the heavy bulk of a mountain peak standing roughly to the west of the complex. That explained both the shadows and the cool breeze, as well as the clarity of the air; this place must have been built in a mountain valley, away from the heavy summer heat of the lower lands.

He tried to study that peak out of the corner of his eye as he followed Wen Qing along the path. Something about the shape of it felt naggingly familiar, although he was quite sure he hadn't seen it before. He'd have remembered that scooping scar, where a section of the mountain had cracked away at some point in the distant past. And it must have been distant indeed; he could see remnants of the old massif on the lower slope, half-covered now by the dark green of a forest that had not only grown back from the devastation, but grown deep and old in turn.

Which was reassuring. Whatever was going on with resentful energy here, the dragon lines of the land itself seemed to be strong.

Perhaps he'd seen this mountain before, but from a different angle, one that obscured the old rockslide? If so, then that would give him a chance to get his bearings and figure out where, exactly, he even *was*. Beyond "obviously not the Burial Mounds."

Then again, maybe it was just the overall situation that felt familiar, rather than the mountain itself. If he didn't focus too hard on the details, he almost felt like he was back at the guest disciple lessons hosted by the Gusu Lan before the war, as the juniors from the various sects made their way to the dining hall for dinner.

Of course, there *were* those pesky details to contend with, he noted. Not least of which being that he didn't see anyone who was young enough to be counted as a junior disciple! Not even anyone Wen Yuan's age. Not to mention an odd scarcity of anyone who might count as senior disciples, although he did note a few elders with silvering hair in the mix. And unlike the Gusu Lan, there didn't appear to be any effort to separate the sexes; men and women were mingling freely, with the casual ease that suggested such mingling was the norm for them.

Not to mention the colors! The Gusu Lan had been insistent about guest disciples wearing the same white as their own disciples – although at least they didn't go as far as Wen Ruohan had, shoving everyone participating in red when he hosted a cultivation conference. While this place… far from everyone being dressed alike, he was fairly certain no two people were dressed the same! The clothes were all in vivid colors – even the whites and blacks were sharp and clear – and looking around…

Well. It was quickly becoming evident that not only was a relative lack of layers the norm, but most of the people he'd met so far had been relatively *over*dressed. There was enough skin showing to give Madam Yu conniptions! And showing on men and women alike, which was both unexpected and interesting.

He was fairly certain there were patterns in what people wore – there always were, even in small villages – but definitely nothing like sect colors to be seen. The closest thing seemed to be a scattering of the same short, loose white robes he and Wen Qing were wearing, and that seemed to act more as a functional overlayer rather than a marker of affiliation per se, given that under the robes they all seemed to be wearing the same wide variety of colors and styles.

And no swords. *Anywhere*. He didn't know what to make of that.

He couldn't help puffing his cheeks out in a frustrated huff. He was used to assessing a thousand little pieces of information in a glance – sect, place of origin, temperament, rank… it was disconcerting to be inundated with information without knowing how to interpret it. No wonder Lan Yi's seedlings always looked so lost every time they ventured down out of their secluded sect to the chaotic streets of Caiyi!

Still. The white robes were, at least, common enough that it was obvious why Wen Qing had given him one; no one looked twice at the two of them as they made their way across the complex.

…Except as their path took them past two young women coming the other direction, giggling as both of them stared at a small black device similar to the one that Wen Qing had used earlier. A bright pink cord looped down from the bottom of it and up, splitting in two halfway along its length. One end led to an equally pink something nestled in one woman's left ear, while the other trailed in the direction of her companion's right ear, so he presumed it was a listening tool of some kind.

The short length of the cord meant that the two were walking close together, the taller half-draped over the other and leaning in over her shoulder to look at the device in her hand. The combination meant that they were staggering and weaving a little as they walked, which was probably the source of at least some of the giggling.

It also meant that they weren't really paying attention to where they were going, walking straight down the center of the path and very obviously completely unaware of Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian coming from the other direction. Amused – and a little *be*mused, because even at his troublemaking worst he couldn't imagine letting himself be *that* careless of his surroundings – Wei Wuxian followed Wen Qing as she huffed in irritation and moved to the side of the path to let them pass.

Except that, just as they were walking past each other, the taller woman stumbled slightly, making the pair veer sideways and almost straight into him. Blinking, the taller woman looked up—

And gaped at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Her companion blinked at the woman's reddened cheeks, then turned and looked at Wei Wuxian herself. Then her eyebrows shot up and she gave him a second, much more *assessing* look.

Wei Wuxian almost laughed. Now *this* was familiar enough! Quickly recalling what he'd seen some of the other walkers doing when encountering someone on the path, he smiled brightly and waved a hand in greeting, but carefully stuck very close to Wen Qing as she kept walking, without pausing to greet the women or even bow.

Which felt *very strange*… but it was what others had done. And it would be extremely awkward if they tried to draw him into a conversation when he couldn't understand a word they said!

The high-pitched squeal as they passed wasn't all that hard to interpret, though. Although he was impressed she'd managed to hit that pitch.

He couldn't help grinning. That had been *fun*. It had been… well, a while since he'd had the chance to flirt just for the fun of it. During the war, too many people had been afraid of him – flirting was supposed to make people feel better, not scare them! And during his visits to Yiling… well, he hadn't wanted anyone to respond for the wrong reasons.

Wen Qing laughed as well, a little shakily, as she glanced over her shoulder at the two women, who were clutching at each other and bouncing like a pair of village girls, talking rapid-fire over each other and waving their hands.

For just a moment, Wen Qing's steps slowed slightly, as if something in that rapid chatter had caught her attention. Then she pursed her lips slightly, eyes sliding sideways to look at Wei Wuxian, as though calculating something.

Then she quirked an eyebrow at him. *I have a plan*, that expression said. *Will you play along?*

He raised his eyebrows right back, and didn't bother hiding his flash of sardonic amusement. Because, really? Like he was suddenly going to *stop* playing along at this point?

Wen Qing snorted slightly, as if acknowledging the point. Then she… started talking? About *what*, he had no idea, but then she waved one hand, indicating a nearby building as if…

Ah. As if she was showing a newly arrived guest disciple around the complex.

Well. He might be beyond the age for a visiting disciple now (thankfully!), but… many of the people walking about the complex did seem to be roughly his own age. So perhaps it wasn't such an odd cover to choose after all.

Except that if they really were so accustomed to hosting guests that seeing one being shown about was *unremarkable*… then they definitely weren't *isolated*. Which meant, given the strange goods and clothing and language and the apparent lack of information about the recent war, meant that this place had to be a *very* long way from the central sect lands.

A long way from home. And he had no idea how he'd gotten here.

Still! It was certainly easy enough to follow attentively behind Wen Qing, looking wherever she gestured and interjecting a simple, "What is that?" and picking a new target more or less at random whenever Wen Qing seemed to be running short of things to say.

And fighting the urge to fall over laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. Or maybe just screaming in frustration. Because here he was, asking questions and getting answers – *detailed* answers, answers that were probably extremely informative and likely enough to tell him at least some of what he wanted to know. And none of it any use, because he was catching *maybe* one word in fifteen, and that was probably being generous.

It would be hilarious, if it weren't so aggravating!

From the slightly incredulous tightness in Wen Qing's shoulders and lips, the irony of the situation was not lost on her. Or possibly she was concerned that it wouldn't be enough, as the crowds began to thicken, the small groups starting to stream together as they headed one large building in particular. But the ruse worked, at least; the two of them drew several curious glances as they veered around and past the crowd, but no one interrupted or stopped them.

Still, Wen Qing wasn't the only one to breathe a subtle sigh of relief when they had passed the crush of the crowd and moved on into a quieter area. Quieter and *older*, he noted with interest; as they continued into another wooded area, he could see places where tree roots had grown up underneath the path, forcing the flagstones up and out of place. And none of the strange hardened sand holding the stones together, either.

The trees here were older as well, thick-boled and heavy with years that had twisted the branches, casting the depths of the woods in shadow broken by patches of light where elder trees had fallen. Although it was also clear that someone was clearing the woods at least somewhat regularly; he didn't see much in the way of deadfall.

The impression of age became even stronger when they came around a turn and the path became a stone stair climbing up a steep slope. These stones were *truly* old, the outer edges where people generally didn't walk grown over with thick green moss and the center of the

steps bowed deeply, worn to a smooth, deep curve by the passage of who knew how many feet over countless ages.

And that was… unexpected. Nothing he'd seen up to this point had felt *aged* by any real measure. But this place… this place felt *old*, deep and rooted in the mountain slope.

Also steep. And long. Wen Qing might not be a cultivator, but she was clearly fit and in excellent health, and even so she was breathing hard by the time they had reached the top of the stairs and passed through a heavy gate in moss-covered walls to enter a new area of the complex.

Or perhaps better to say an *older* area. Because this section was clearly of an age with the stairs, in a way that had nothing to do with the actual age of the wood itself – because living in Lotus Pier, you learned to watch for the telltale signs of wood aging, and there was clearly a swath of buildings here that had been rebuilt relatively recently. Although not too recently; a few decades, perhaps.

So the fire was here, in the heart of the complex.

Because this *was* the heart, far older than the other areas. And, he noted, with none of the odd mismatch between the design of the buildings and their underlying structure that he'd noticed before. This area felt… *organic*, of a unified whole, in a way that the lower, outer area did not.

And perhaps that answered part of the mystery of when this place had been established. He remembered the renovations at Lotus Pier. The Wens hadn't destroyed the complex – after all, the whole point of the attack was to claim the strategically advantageous and economically prosperous river port. But once the war was over…

Well. Jiang Cheng had been determined to build up Lotus Pier on a bigger, grander scale. Partially as a show of force to make up for the loss of disciples and the patronizing gazes of the older sect leaders who looked at Jiang Cheng's youth and lost core and found him wanting, partially because he was determined that Lotus Pier would *become* something bigger and grander.

They'd blended the new construction with the original structures, but there was no way to evoke the weight of time and tradition in the newer expansions. It meant that the newer areas had always stood out somewhat; superficially, they'd echoed the older areas, but the similarities were often only skin deep.

Which rather fit the pattern he'd seen here, didn't it? This older heart of the complex had been damaged, but the restorations had been done carefully, incorporated into the fabric not only of the buildings, but the complex as a whole. But clearly, the complex had expanded since, into the lower, newer area. Bigger. Grander. But not quite *fitting* the older style they aped as a result.

This older part of the complex was significantly less crowded, as well. Wen Qing visibly relaxed, letting her one-sided ramble come to an end as she led Wei Wuxian onto a side trail that circled the outer edge of the buildings. Curious, he followed.

He'd half-expected her to lead him into one of the buildings, but instead she continued to follow the side trail as it veered away, into the forested area – and they were starting to move into genuine forest now, away from the carefully tended, aesthetically pleasing stands of the lower area and the screening woods of the slope buffering the older section of the complex from the bustling outer area. Although it was clear that they were still within the complex; the path was clear and well-maintained, with branching paths leading away to other areas. And apparently there was a spring nearby – likely the water source the complex had initially been built around – because periodically small wooden bridges carried the path over small, bright streams of clear-flowing water.

And then another turn in the path, and the wood opened out to a small clearing around a house, a hint of garden walls on the other side.

As they approached, the door opened, and Lan Wangji stepped out. Nodding to Wen Qing, the man turned to Wei Wuxian and bowed.

"Welcome," he said.

The tofu cubes sizzled as they hit the pan, the sound sharp and loud and oddly comfortable in the small kitchen. Lan Wangji stirred them a few times to ensure that they weren't sticking to the bottom, then covered the pan to keep the oil from spitting onto the stovetop and turned to the pot on the other front burner. Lifting the lid, he gave the soup an experimental stir, nodding in satisfaction at the light, savory scent that wafted up with the steam.

Wei Wuxian made a noise of definite interest, craning his neck slightly to try and peer into the pot from his perch sitting on the counter, feet swinging idly in the air.

Technically, Lan Wangji knew he probably should shoo the man off the counter. If only to begin Wei Wuxian's process of acculturation to the twenty-first century with some sense of proper etiquette. But… it had been a very long day. For everyone. Including him, and *he* at least had the advantage of knowing everything that was happening, and why, and what they were planning to do about it.

Wei Wuxian's space had been invaded, his things stolen – and all of it using an opening that Lan Wangji himself had inadvertently created, with a gesture that he had intended as, and he thought had been taken as, hospitality. And Lan Wangji had only been able to explain the barest minimum before he'd had to leave to prepare for their plan. And now this sudden change.

Under normal circumstances, Lan Wangji had no doubt that Wei Wuxian would be bursting with questions – probably *was* bursting with them, and doubtless making a list in the back of his mind for later. But after Wen Qing had emptied her bag of his things and hurried away, he'd seemed content to quietly follow Lan Wangji to the kitchen as he went to put the final touches on dinner.

All things considered, he thought they could afford to forego the usual back and forth of questions and answers for the evening. The language lessons were *work*. They'd earned a

day's respite.

Lan Wangji would have liked to invite Wen Qing to stay, but she had been anxious to get back. All told, by the time she was back to the lab and walked out the front door again, it would have been roughly an hour since she'd arrived; a reasonable window of time, but enough that she didn't want to push it much longer. Which left Lan Wangji to attempt to help Wei Wuxian settle in.

Which had been an… eye-opening experience for Lan Wangji. He had taken a sort of pride in living in a very traditional manner, keeping modern conveniences to a minimum to maintain the historic essence of the Jingshi. Preparing his home for Wei Wuxian's arrival, however, he'd come to realize just *how* modern his life truly was.

Oh, the trappings of the Jingshi were traditional enough; the design of the lamps, the layout of the main room with its low table, the screens that covered the windows. But where the normal visitor would look at the silk and wood and simple, clean lines of the lamp, Wei Wuxian looked at the *light* – the steady, unwavering glow of a warm-colored high-efficiency LED. He looked at the books lining the shelves, books that no ancient household would risk having out in an open space to potentially be damaged or stolen, and only a wealthy household indeed would have them in such numbers. Discrepancies that would never catch the attention of a modern visitor, but which must have stood out like beacon fires to someone who had lived his whole life without such luxuries.

Although Wei Wuxian's face had lit up when he spotted Lan Wangji's guqin on its stand in the corner. Which was not where he normally kept it, but Lan Wangji had hoped it might serve as something familiar to use as a conversation piece, something where they could practice the words without the additional complication of trying to navigate completely unfamiliar concepts and items.

And he wanted to try playing together at some point. He'd recorded as many of Wei Wuxian's idle performances as he'd been able during the hours in the lab, using his phone and his laptop – although he *desperately* wanted a chance to get real recordings made using proper, high-fidelity sound equipment. Hopefully, they could use the recordings to find out if the man knew any of the melodies that they *knew* had existed once but had no way to recreate. But listening to music was nothing like *participating* in it.

But that would have to wait for later, when things had calmed somewhat. For now, food and rest were more important.

Then there was the kitchen itself – although this came as less of a surprise to Lan Wangji, as that was one area where he very much preferred the advantages of modern conveniences. When he'd moved in, he'd been careful to upgrade to the best appliances available, selecting for efficiency more than flashy bells and whistles; he was not going to live so far from the roads and shops without good refrigeration and solid safety features, especially after he started hosting a young teenager on occasion.

Wei Wuxian had marveled at the refrigerator – although he seemed sensitive to the fact that one should not leave it open for too long, likely familiar with the old practice of ice boxes. But it likely wasn't just the cold he found surprising; after that first meal, Lan Wangji had

done some research, and for all that he normally adhered to seasonal cooking, many of the fruits and vegetables he considered standard staples in fact grew in different seasons as well – and many of them came in forms that would be nearly unrecognizable compared to their ancient versions. To say nothing of eggs and tofu, and the chicken he had thawed for dinner. Which had led to an equally intent investigation of the freezer, and then the gas stovetop when Lan Wangji turned the burners on – although he had, thankfully, approached the last very carefully.

For now, however, Wei Wuxian seemed to be content to perch on the side counter where Lan Wangji normally prepared tea, kicking his feet and humming idly as he watched Lan Wangji move about the kitchen with bright-eyed interest. The man hadn't even bothered to put his hair back into the high tail he normally wore, leaving it down in the loose braid. Lan Wangji was hoping that was a sign that Wei Wuxian was comfortable enough with him to forego some of the trappings of formality, now that they would be sharing space.

Not that formalities had ever been a particular issue for Wei Wuxian, granted. But it gave him hope that the man was genuinely relaxed, rather than simply exhausted or overwhelmed.

At the moment, his attention had switched to the plume of steam rushing out of the vent of the rice cooker, nose twitching at the scent of cooking rice. Lan Wangji almost laughed; between the intent expression and the twitching nose, he couldn't help thinking that the man looked like a particularly adventuresome rabbit.

Or a very hungry one. Fortunately, everything was almost done. Switching off the burner for the tofu, Lan Wangji added the cooked greens he'd set aside, stirring everything briskly a few times before scraping everything out into a serving dish.

Wei Wuxian bounced down onto his feet and picked the bowl up. "There?" he asked, tilting his head in the direction of the main room and the table.

"Mn." Lan Wangji nodded.

That set a rhythm – Wei Wuxian ferrying bowls and utensils out to the table while Lan Wangji finished stirring the soup and added the final herbs, and then prepared the serving bowl for the chicken.

A soft click nearby was his only warning before an electronic *racket* rattled the air.

Beeeep! Beeeep! Beee…

Lan Wangji winced, hastily hitting the *off* switch on the rice cooker as Wei Wuxian yelped from the other room and poked his head around the door, eyes wide with surprise. For which Lan Wangji didn't blame him in the least; *he'd* almost jumped out of his skin, having forgotten how bone-jarringly *loud* the timer on the cooker was. He normally didn't use it; if he had the time and energy, he vastly preferred to cook his rice himself, or cooked noodles instead.

Opening the lid, he fluffed the rice and let it rest for a moment while he ladled the soup into bowls. Then he passed the soup bowls to Wei Wuxian, served out the rice as well, and then

joined the man in the main room at the table.

Wei Wuxian was all but sparkling as he looked at the array of dishes. Understandably. Being stuck on only the "safe" foods that Wen Qing could identify from the campus kitchens, his diet had not exactly been cause for enthusiasm. It had helped that he didn't seem to have any allergies to any foods that he recognized, but the danger of an unknown allergen being mixed into a sauce or cross-contamination meant that they'd continued to stick to very simple foods by necessity.

It was one of the reasons Lan Wangji had put some extra effort into preparing the night's meal. From how free Wei Wuxian had been with the pepper, the man seemed accustomed to more flavorful food, and cooking in his home kitchen meant that Lan Wangji had full control over the ingredients; he could ensure that nothing they weren't certain of was mixed in, while also making things with a little more taste to them.

He might, perhaps, have been showing off a bit, too. After all, he was a good cook – it was something of a hobby. And given that he was welcoming a new housemate who would be staying with him for an indefinite time, a little added effort for hospitality seemed appropriate.

A glimpse of red-orange in the corner of his eye caught his wandering attention just in time: distracted by his thoughts, he'd picked up the wrong item. Wen Yuan had lived in Hunan for a time, and as a result had the occasional taste for dishes spicy enough that even being *near* them frankly made Lan Wangji's eyes water. Originally, the boy had been conscientious about not inflicting his taste for spice on Lan Wangji, but then Wen Ning had let slip that he and Wen Qing could rarely afford the high quality spices and chili oils required for that sort of cooking. So Lan Wangji had started keeping some available, for when Wen Yuan chose to visit.

Very deliberately setting the chili oil aside, Lan Wangji considered that. With Wei Wuxian in the guest room… knowing Wen Yuan, he would happily volunteer for a mattress in the main room, but Lan Wangji would be a poor host if he accepted. Perhaps he could clear out the office?

The one complication was that he would want to have ready access to his reference books there. And he didn't want to move them out into the main room. The office he could lock, and he was reasonably certain that, at least for the time being, Wei Wuxian would honor a locked door out of courtesy if nothing else. Because he'd definitely noticed that Wei Wuxian tended to gravitate towards books; Lan Wangji would not put it past the man to pick up a book at random and use what he'd figured out of the writing system and its changes so far to start teaching himself to read properly by brute force.

Which would not be a bad thing, except that most of Lan Wangji's reference books were *histories*. There would be names Wei Wuxian knew in there, by reputation alone if not personally…

And Lan Wangji honestly didn't know which would be worse. Seeing the names of people you knew, batted about as weapons of debate by warring scholars with axes to grind? Or not

seeing their names all, and discovering that your friends and loved ones had been completely forgotten by history?

Wen Qing was right. The grief, when it hit, was going to hit *hard*.

And Wei Wuxian was no fool. He would *notice* when a history book started listing names he knew. Listing them in the context of the *distant past*.

Lan Wangji may not have figured out how he *did* want to broach that particular revelation, but that was definitely *not* how he wanted to do it. There was a reason he had gone to some effort to reorganize his shelves this afternoon.

And on a more practical note, most of those texts were not a good way to learn a language. Lan Wangji had, as Wen Qing and Nie Mingjue had correctly (annoyingly) noted, grown up immersed in the language of academics and scholars, and even *he* got headaches trying to wade through the prose of some of those writers.

Wei Wuxian made a startled sound, and Lan Wangji blinked, realizing he'd once again been lost in his own thoughts. During which…

Oh. He was holding the bottle of chili oil, having worked the top off, and was sniffing at the open with a look of open puzzlement. A quick swipe of a callused fingertip collected the residue clinging to the lip of the bottle, and Wei Wuxian tilted his head back and forth, clearly baffled by the almost violent color.

Then, before Lan Wangji could think to warn the man, he licked the residue off his finger. And made a *very* startled sound.

Lan Wangji bit back an internal cringe. That particular chili oil was *painfully* hot, even when you *knew* what was coming—

Wei Wuxian *sparkled*. There was no other word for it. And added a light drizzle to the greens and tofu.

Lan Wangji stared at him.

Plucking up some of the doctored greens, Wei Wuxian chewed thoughtfully, and then grinned even more broadly, humming happily. And *added more*, blinking innocently at Lan Wangji's undisguised look of complete disbelief.

…Apparently the Hubei inclination towards hot foods had very deep roots.

Lan Wangji sighed, shaking his head. Wei Wuxian laughed brightly at him, alternating bites of the doctored greens, the rice, and the chicken – which was gratifying, at least; he clearly did appreciate the original flavoring Lan Wangji had added. The greens had simply been seasoned with salt and pepper. And interestingly, he'd clearly figured out that grains worked well at clearing the palate to buffer the burn.

Well. At least capsaicin allergies were *very* rare – and if he had a reaction, he wouldn't be alone in the lab.

And if he liked it that much… well. Lan Wangji could stock more, and see if there were other varieties available.

Although now he was wondering. Did Wei Wuxian cook? He'd seemed a little surprised by the kitchen, but that could just have easily been the multitude of unfamiliar devices and familiar tools made with unfamiliar designs and materials. Originally, the Jingshi hadn't had a kitchen at all; that was a later addition, because historically the inhabitant had been fed from the main kitchens, along with everyone else living in the complex. And it would have been unusual for a noble or a titled scholar to cook for himself – and Lan Wangji was fairly certain that was how Wei Wuxian had tentatively identified him for the moment.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian had watched him as if he understood the process, if not the specific tools and techniques Lan Wangji had used. Given the chaos of the era, it probably wouldn't have been unusual for even a noble to know at least the basics of camp cooking. And if he understood the implications of Wei Wuxian having been affiliated with Yunmeng Jiang, whoever they may have been, then he likely had been a noble's retainer, rather than a noble himself. Which would have included certain practical skills considered beneath a noble's dignity.

So it was quite likely he *did* know. Which might be another promising venue for the language lessons. Lan Wangji could show him how to use the modern appliances – and cooking was a cooperative activity, or at least it could be. Which would be an excellent context for practical, *useable* conversation skills.

And giving him things to do, an actual role to play, would help Wei Wuxian start integrating. Even if the man's spice tolerance was terrifying.

But that would have to be a project for later. Even if they hadn't just eaten, Lan Wangji was exhausted, and Wei Wuxian likely was as well. And it was getting late. He'd delayed the final dinner preparations until after Wei Wuxian had arrived, just in case. Now the sun had long descended behind the western mountain, and even the light in the sky was quickly fading, despite the late summer sunset.

Gathering the dishes from the table, Lan Wangji went back to the kitchen. He'd deliberately made more than needed of several of them; those could go into the refrigerator to supplement later meals, or as potential snacks.

He'd hosted Wen Yuan. He understood the dire necessity of having things available to nibble.

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian gamely stepped in as well, picking up the emptied dishes and scrubbing them clean – although he seemed highly amused by the dish detergent when Lan Wangji demonstrated its use, generating a prodigious amount of froth and then cheerfully forming shapes with it, only to chuckle as the bubble sculptures almost immediately collapsed. For all his amusement, however, he did the work with brisk efficiency, and soon the last of the dishes had been wiped down and set on the drying rack – a dishwasher being one of the modern conveniences, that Lan Wangji had been content to forego.

It had seemed practical at the time; one person didn't generate that many dishes. Once Wen Yuan joined them, however…

At least he didn't have a microwave. The thought of explaining how to use one safely – and how to answer the inevitable *but how does it work?* – was beyond daunting.

Drying his hands, Lan Wangji waved for Wei Wuxian to precede him back to the main room – the kitchen was narrow, having been designed for a single person. Then he led the way through the door that opened onto the covered veranda that served as a walkway connecting the front area to the more private spaces of the house.

The original design of the Jingshi had been quite simple: three rooms arranged in a row facing the main garden, the central room acting as a formal receiving space and flanked by the bedroom on one side and a more relaxed sitting area with a hearth on the other. But over the centuries, it had expanded somewhat. Part of the sitting area had been partitioned off and connected to the formal receiving room as the kitchen; the rest of the space had become a study, with windows arranged to catch the light. Although Lan Wangji suspected it might have been intended as a guest room originally; that would explain the addition of the current guest room next to it, on the northern side where it wouldn't interfere with the light. And then there were other very important additions that had come with the advent of indoor plumbing.

Lan Wangji reached for the door handle and then hesitated when he realized that Wei Wuxian hadn't followed him along the walkway. Instead, he had stopped short just outside the formal main room to look out over the garden.

The gathering dusk had draped the garden in shades of deepening blue. By this time, the magnolias had dropped their petals, leaving just the white lotuses to stand out, almost luminescent against the shadows. Here and there, the ripples from the small stream feeding into the pond glinted and shimmered as they caught the light from the small, solar-powered lanterns he'd scattered across the garden, following the stone-paved footpath and two planted off-center in the water. Dim lights; he didn't want the artificial light to confuse the fish in the pond, but he liked the way they gleamed like stars among the greenery in the evenings.

After a minute or two, Wei Wuxian shook himself slightly and turned away from the scene, smiling crookedly in apology for the delay. Lan Wangji shook his head; so far as he cared, that long pause had been a compliment of the highest order. The chaotic period between the fall of the Han and the rise of the Sui had marked the rise of scholarly meditation gardens like this, as poets and scholars embraced principles of retreat from secular life. It was… flattering, to have someone who had lived when the style was born so impressed by his own efforts.

And he was also glad to see the enthusiastic *bounce* back in Wei Wuxian's step as the man trotted over to join him. Not that it had been gone, exactly… but there had been a subtle edge of calculation, of wary readiness, so well disguised that he hadn't really noticed it until it was gone. Hopefully, that was a sign that Wei Wuxian felt he could genuinely relax here.

And speaking of relaxing… turning the handle, Lan Wangji opened the door and stepped into the bathing room.

He was fairly confident that this was an older expansion of the Jingshi; it didn't have the odd tucked-into-available-space feel of the kitchen, for example. Whatever it had been, it was clearly designed for using water, with the floor sunk into the ground so that one had to descend two steps to the actual floor, and a drain in the floor itself. It might have been a

laundry, perhaps – but Lan Wangji was skeptical that a house with no *kitchen* would have had a dedicated space for laundering.

He was not at all surprised when Wei Wuxian's face lit up at the sight of the large tub. It was a very nice tub, after all – one of his not-so-small indulgences, although he'd been careful to select one that maintained the classical aesthetic of the room, with golden bamboo slats for the walls and paving stones worn silk-smooth for the flooring. Infinitely preferable, in his mind, to the tiling that Lan Xichen had suggested when they had been renewing the grout and updating the plumbing. Even if the tiles would have been easier to maintain.

There was a small closet beside the door with shelves to hold towels and toiletries. Lan Wangji had cleared a space earlier for the towels and bath beans he'd acquired for Wei Wuxian, which he had picked up as they'd left the main room. He set them on the open shelf, making certain that Wei Wuxian saw him doing so. Which was easier said than done; Wei Wuxian was paying close attention, yes, but he was also distracted by the glass-paned cubicle in the corner, casting puzzled glances at it from the corner of his eye.

Which. Well. It would be a lie if Lan Wangji were to claim that he hadn't been looking forward to introducing this aspect of the twenty-first century.

The wide-eyed *stare* when he turned the shower on was every bit as gratifying as Lan Wangji had anticipated.

Gingerly, Wei Wuxian reached into the spray, pulling his hand back in obvious surprise when he discovered that the water was *warm*. He blinked at his fingers, then at the steam starting to gather inside the shower stall, and then turned those wide grey eyes to look at Lan Wangji.

Carefully not smiling at the reaction, Lan Wangji nodded before reaching in and turning the water off again.

From the way Wei Wuxian eyed the handles, he was *seriously* considering just jumping straight in *now*, clothing and all. Which Lan Wangji fully understood; it hadn't missed his notice that Wei Wuxian hadn't attempted to wash his hair earlier. Understandable, in the chill of the lab, but it had to be uncomfortable.

He would have to introduce Wei Wuxian to the heaters; a central furnace and thermostat was another modern convenience he had deliberately chosen to forego. But that could wait for later. For now… Well. The next room was the awkward one. Because while traditional living had its appeal in many aspects of life, the toilet was *not* one of them.

Thankfully, the word for toilet – chamber pot, technically – was one they had already worked out. And Lan Wangji could only be deeply, deeply, *incredibly* grateful that toilet paper had already been in use in China by the sixth century, because he could not conceive of how he would have explained *that*. Which meant all he really needed to do was demonstrate how the flushing system worked.

Wei Wuxian's eyebrow quirked at that part, in what was probably the most dubious expression Lan Wangji had seen on him. Which was unexpected, given his usual enthusiasm for new things…

Oh. Of course; from the perspective of someone who had lived before modern plumbing and water treatment systems, when access to clean, fresh water dictated the building of cities and the course of wars, *flushing*, even using a water-efficient system, would seem like the sort of lavish waste only the most sheltered noble would think of. And while Lan Wangji had explained plumbing on a basic level, without septic tanks, disposing of waste so close to a water source was less lavish and more utterly idiotic.

Both valid, even crucial concerns. Both matters that Lan Wangji had never really thought about, save as abstract principles when assessing necessary renovations to the Jingshi and potential guidelines for interpreting decisions made in the deep past. Strange, to realize that living in the modern age meant that he was more sheltered from the realities of sickness and deprivation than even the most sheltered and privileged emperor.

Food for thought – and probably an interesting conversation to have later, when communication was something they could approach more casually. For now, he could only nod – *yes, this truly is the way we do this* – and then move on to the last room.

Setting the rest of Wei Wuxian's things on the clothes chest, Lan Wangji stood back and let Wei Wuxian explore, watching his reactions with interest. Like the rest of the Jingshi, the design, layout and furnishings of the guest room were traditional in style, but while the overall Jingshi tended to adhere fairly closely to the classical aesthetics of the Tang Dynasty, the guest room was an eclectic mix of traditions spanning roughly a thousand years.

And, of course, certain things that weren't traditional at all. Lan Wangji couldn't quite hold back his amusement at Wei Wuxian's startled expression when he sat on the corner of the bed and *bounced*.

Wei Wuxian huffed, wrinkling his nose at Lan Wangji as he poked quizzically at the pillow and the blankets, obviously assessing the difference in quality from the rather basic ones he'd been using on the cot in the lab. Then he grinned and bounced on the mattress again, deliberately this time, to pop back up to his feet.

Watching Wei Wuxian wander over to investigate the desk – at least he'd remembered to clear out the odds and ends that Wen Yuan had accumulated over his various stays, mostly spare charging cords and earphones and backup batteries – Lan Wangji was caught off-guard by a jaw-cracking yawn. Glancing through the window, he realized it was later than he'd expected; the blue light of dusk had already given way to full night.

The yawn had caught Wei Wuxian's attention. The man glanced around the room once more, then looked at Lan Wangji and tilted his head. "You sleep where?" he asked, curious rather than concerned. Doubtless he'd already inferred from the empty desk drawers and lack of personal touches that this room was intended for guests, rather than Lan Wangji's own.

Lan Wangji nodded in the direction of the master bedroom, on the other side of the main room. Wei Wuxian poked his head out the door, then nodded, obviously marking the door leading to the extended section on the other end of the walkway.

Lan Wangji lingered long enough to show Wei Wuxian the switch on the dimmable lamp on the desk, and the blankets folded in the chest at the foot of the bed. Then he bade the man

good night and retreated to let him settle in, withdrawing to his own room.

There, he hesitated briefly. He probably *should* make his notes on the evening while everything was fresh in his mind. Not to mention that Wen Yuan was likely waiting anxiously for news; Lan Wangji had updated him on the situation with the project earlier, with Nie Mingjue stopping by to verbally inform Wen Yuan about the details that Lan Wangji did not want to put in writing. Paranoid, perhaps – but this situation was unsettling enough to warrant extra caution.

He *was* disappointed that he hadn't seen Wen Yuan's expression when Nie Mingjue had revealed the *floating sword* detail. Apparently there had been much squeaking.

By mutual agreement between himself, Nie Mingjue, and Wen Qing, however, they had decided not to inform Wen Yuan of what they were planning or where Wei Wuxian was now staying. None of them wanted the boy to be dragged into the inevitable backlash of that decision, or pressured to give up the secret.

Which meant that Lan Wangji would need to keep two sets of notes for the next week; one for himself, with a full accounting of what they did and discussed, the other for Wen Yuan and consumption among the project more generally.

Lan Wangji considered his options, and sighed to himself. His work ethic said to finish the notes now. But it was already later than his usual bedtime, after a chaotic day. He would compromise by jotting down the highlights, but in the balance, he suspected resting well tonight would be more important.

Tomorrow would be… stressful.

The stunned silence lasted for what felt like several minutes, although in reality it was probably no more than a few seconds.

The stark contrast made the explosion of shouting that followed all the more deafening.

Wen Qing didn't let that reaction show, however – not on her face or her body. She simply sat, primly correct, spine straight but not stiff and hands resting relaxed on the table in front of her, fingers lightly interlaced. Every aspect of her body language conveyed calm. Control. Confidence. And with them, authority and *power*.

And she let her unmoved silence and granite expression worthy of Lan Wangji declare just how utterly *unimpressed* she was.

Lan Wangji himself was joining the meeting over video call, to maintain his strict quarantine, using the built-in system rather than Wen Qing's laptop. That was a deliberate decision on their part; he would intervene if needed, but if possible she wanted to avoid drawing attention to him and his involvement. The last thing they needed was his strained relationship with his uncle coloring Lan Qiren's decisions… or people guessing where Wei Wuxian might have gone.

Wen Qing would rather have had that added bit of distance herself… but there was no way this could happen any way but in person, not if she wanted to make her point *stick*.

Lan Qiren eventually broke through the tumult by slamming his hands on the table. "*Silence!*" he bellowed, sweeping the group with a furious, quelling glare.

A glare he then turned upon her. "Explain yourself, Doctor Wen!"

Wen Qing met his fury with chill silence for a moment, cool expression never wavering. Then she replied, "You yourself were present for the incident, Director Lan. Yesterday morning, Jin Zixun violated the lab quarantine, intentionally and knowingly. He expressed neither regret nor remorse." She held Lan Qiren's stare a moment longer, then deliberately turned her gaze to Lan Xichen, seated next to him. "When I objected, Project Manager Lan declared that this blatant violation of project protocol and regulations was *only* an overreach of authority." She narrowed her eyes ever so slightly, including Professor Yao in her stare. "It has also come to my attention that he faced no reprimand for his actions."

Professor Yao spluttered; Wen Qing was starting to suspect that he did that as much to dodge awkward questions as he did out of actual outrage. Lan Xichen, on the other hand…

"Surely there's no need for that?" he said, blinking. "It was only his first offense, after all."

Wen Qing refused to dignify that with an answer. Because given the number of complaints she and Nie Mingjue had logged about Jin Zixun's conduct, the fact that this was *not* the idiot's first offense was a matter of formal record. She just held Lan Xichen's eyes for a long moment until he flushed slightly, gaze sliding away from hers.

Good. So he *could* hear his own foolishness, if forced to pay attention to what he'd said.

Deliberately, she swept the gathered project personnel with her eyes. "The quarantine, as I have stated multiple times *and to which you have all affirmed your understanding*, is vital to ensuring Wei Wuxian's health and safety. Given the clear disregard for this fact that I witnessed, I have exercised my prerogative as his physician to remove him from an unsafe environment."

Now she turned her flat stare back to Lan Qiren, whose face was cycling through a remarkable range of colors. It was obvious that he desperately wanted to rage at her about overstepping her authority… except that, as the physician overseeing Wei Wuxian's health, she *did* have that authority.

Now to really unleash the fox in the henhouse.

"Furthermore. Given that Manager Lan apparently felt he had the right to authorize the *outright theft* of Wei Wuxian's personal belongings on Professor Yao's behalf, I will *not* be disclosing Wei Wuxian's new location."

That set off a whole new surge of furious talking – drowned out by Professor Yao's outraged roar of, "*Theft?!* How *dare* you…"

A sharp, icy look cut his words off. “Your student took those items without asking. *After* I had made it clear that you were not permitted to do so. Now look me in the eye and tell me that you would have returned them.”

“Of course not!” the man blustered. “Those are, priceless, irreplaceable artifacts and require proper handling and storage!”

Well. At least he admitted it. “That,” Wen Qing said coolly, “is theft, Professor Yao.”

“Doctor Wen, I understand your concerns,” Lan Xichen said sternly. “However, the artifacts associated with Yiling Laozu do belong to the university…”

“They do not,” she corrected brusquely, before he could continue.

That finally broke Lan Qiren’s apoplectic silence. “Must I show you the deed of possession?!” he demanded.

A throat cleared. “About that, Director.”

All eyes turned to Nie Mingjue, and Wen Qing carefully controlled the urge to smirk. She had to keep the dispassionate mask of the uninterested professional in place, or she risked having her concerns dismissed as romantic emotionalism.

“I’ve had my people checking into the legalities of the situation,” Nie Mingjue explained. “Long story short, that deed of possession was written on the assumption that the original owner was dead. Given that he’s not, and his prior claim is undeniable given that he was *wearing* all of it when the deed was signed?” He shrugged. “I’m sorry, Director, but that deed of possession is invalid.”

That rendered Lan Qiren speechless again.

Lan Xichen slowly closed his mouth, eyes flickering around the room, and then cleared his throat. “Of course, they are his belongings,” he said slowly. “But Professor Yao is not wrong about the importance of proper preservation and storage. Surely, now that we’ve provided appropriate replacements…”

Wen Qing didn’t even try to hide her disbelief. “Setting aside the fact that no one has consulted *him* about any of this, how do you provide an *appropriate replacement* for the sword that he probably received from his father or his teacher? The embroidery that was probably done by a relative he will *never see again*?”

She shook her head, lowering her voice ever so slightly so that the people gathered around the table reflexively leaned in just a little to hear – the better to make them pay attention. “Wei Wuxian is a young man who has lost *everything*. His friends, his family, his home, his very society – even his enemies are gone. He’s even lost his *language* for all intents and purposes, given that no one speaks it anymore. And now you want to demand what little he has left? Including the shirt off his back?”

Lan Xichen blinked at that, looking completely taken aback. As if that perspective had never even occurred to him—

Of course it hadn't. He'd agreed to Professor Yao's demands because – at least on a surface level – it had seemed like the simplest way to make everyone happy. It had seemed *fair*, a way to keep the peace.

And once he'd committed to the decision, he'd simply… not considered all the ways that it wasn't fair at all to the person who would be most affected by Lan Xichen making agreements on his behalf, since Wei Wuxian wasn't someone Lan Xichen had to interact with.

More than a few people around the table were blinking as well, even Professor Yao, to the exasperated sidelong glances of several others. Good. They were *thinking*, now, in a way that they hadn't before.

Which meant that this was the best opening she was going to get to dive into the real problem.

So Wen Qing let her words sink in a moment longer, before pulling brisk professionalism around herself like donning a set of surgical scrubs. "Which leads me to the second reason I requested this meeting," she said, all business. "In the course of yesterday's incident, it has come to my attention that most of you have never conducted research involving living human subjects before, and are unaware of the regulations involved."

More like *none* of them. Archaeologists generally didn't conduct medical or psychological research – or at least, not the kind that involved dealing with living people – and Lan Qiren's allergy to anything that even hinted of *soft sciences* meant he had no interest in incorporating anthropological research into his work. And, of course, he'd selected for similar mindsets when building his research team. Admittedly, not unreasonable for a project intended to study a corpse fifteen hundred years old. Rather awkward, now that the research subject turned out to not be a corpse after all.

As she'd expected, the announcement garnered blinks from nearly everyone present. Including Lan Xichen, who leaned forward with interest. "Yes, that does make sense," he agreed. "Do you have resources regarding the pertinent regulations we can distribute?"

"I will send them to all project members after the meeting," Wen Qing told him. And bit back the urge to snarl, or maybe bang her head on the table, because she'd *already* provided those resources to Lan Qiren for him to distribute in his role as project director. She'd known he'd been resistant to her requests to re-evaluate the research plan, but not that he had apparently actively ignored pertinent information!

Then again, she'd certainly *suspected*. Which was why she'd chosen this approach.

"However," she continued briskly, "there is one aspect of those regulations we need to address immediately." She met Lan Xichen's eyes squarely. "Manager Lan, you appear to be under the impression that as project manager, you have the authority to grant permission for research involving Wei Wuxian and his belongings. You do not."

That sent surprised mutters rippling around the table. And Lan Qiren, predictably, bristled. "Doctor Wen, that is *expressly* his role as project manager, as laid out in the main plan of the project—"

"Director Lan, *you* do not have the power to authorize such research."

Dead silence.

Wen Qing leaned back in her chair, deliberately relaxed. "Professors. Of *everyone* involved in this project, there is only *one* person who can authorize any research. *Whatsoever*."

Pandemonium erupted.

"What do you mean—"

"How *dare* you presume to dictate—"

"You overstep yourself, Miss Wen!"

Wen Qing eyed the way Lan Wangji's lips pursed ever so slightly in his version of a frown, and bit back the urge to laugh. *I win that bet.*

Poor, naïve Lan Wangji. He'd never been part of a large research project before. Meaning he'd never really been exposed to the constant jockeying for the most high-authority, high-*status* position available. Or the assumption that of course everyone else would have the same priorities.

And if that thought was slightly panicked… well. She'd come prepared to be the target of frustrated ambitions, but that didn't mean she *liked* it.

She refused to let that show, and simply sat back in her chair, the picture of relaxed patience. And, after the first minute passed with no sign of the shouting abating – even Lan Qiren couldn't shout down *this* chaos – she quietly, deliberately slipped her phone out of her pocket.

Because the universe apparently did have a sense of humor, a momentary lull in the waves of shouting coincided perfectly with the victory music as she completed the latest level in her game.

In the appalled silence that followed, she looked up and arched an eyebrow. "When you are finished throwing tantrums, I will continue. I can wait."

Probably not the most *politic* thing to say, she granted, as the room exploded into shouting all over again. But very satisfying. And honestly, she'd never been all that inclined to be politic in the first place.

"*ENOUGH*."

As shocked quiet fell again, Wen Qing rubbed her ringing ear and scowled at the tiger who'd seen fit to roar right next to her.

Nie Mingjue shrugged unapologetically. “You may be willing to wait, Doctor, but I have other things I need to do today.”

Given that he’d contacted both her and Lan Wangji before the meeting to warn them that they needed to talk afterwards… not entirely reassuring. Hopefully it was just details on how to maintain security given the new arrangement.

Nodding, Wen Qing set her phone down. “Professors. *I* do not have the power to authorize research, either.”

Good. That took the wind out of their sails, outrage replaced by bafflement.

Now, finally, she could get to the real point.

“He is an adult in good health and of sound mind. Which means, Professors, that the only person in the entire project who can legally authorize any research involving Wei Wuxian or his belongings is *Wei Wuxian*.”

Hm. She’d always thought the saying about hearing a pin drop was literary license. At the moment, she might actually believe it. Despite the fact that the conference room was carpeted.

She folded her hands on the table in front of her, the very picture of calm professionalism again. “I apologize,” she told them. “I am a medical researcher; part of my training included the ethical obligations inherent in conducting human subject research, including the absolute importance of informed consent by the subject. I should have spoken to everyone sooner, but I thought it best to let Director Qiren address the issue, as he is head of the project.”

Which he did not do, she did not say, very loudly. Across the table, Lan Wangji’s eyes glinted agreement. Always good to have a partner in the art of well-earned pettiness, she supposed. She was very sick of Lan Qiren stonewalling her efforts to raise the topic of necessary changes to his research plan.

Lan Xichen cleared his throat somewhat awkwardly. “Doctor Wen, you have raised an excellent point.”

I sense a ‘but’ coming, she thought cynically.

“Of course, Wei Wuxian should have the final say. However…”

Close enough.

“…I’m sure we can come to a satisfactory arrangement. After all, if the project had not decided to thaw Yiling Laozu…”

“Brother. *Stop*,” Lan Wangji said shortly.

Lan Xichen started, clearly not having expected an interruption from that quarter. Seizing the opening, Wen Qing leaned forward.

“Manager Lan,” she said, letting a sharp edge slip into her tone. “There are three problems with what you were about to say.”

Lan Xichen gave her a look that distinctly had an air of chiding to it. Which, in a way, she could understand. Doubtless, the man thought he was being helpful, smoothing ruffled feathers by conceding her primary point while suggesting a few minor concessions to keep the more recalcitrant among the project happy, letting them save face with justifications for their behavior.

In theory, it was even a good approach. Except for the fact that it was the same mindset that had gotten them to this point in the first place.

So she ignored the performative disappointment and raised a finger. “First: Wei Wuxian owes us nothing.”

Someone – Professor Liu, she thought – scoffed loudly. “If not for us, he’d still be frozen!”

“He didn’t ask us to thaw him, either,” Wen Qing said dryly. “And we certainly didn’t ask his permission. He had no say in any of it.” She arched an eyebrow sardonically. “And I have to say that it strikes me as highly inappropriate to say he owes us for something that we did with the express intent of using his *dead body* for our benefit.”

That got her more than a few sour looks; most of the researchers worked in bioanthropology, after all, which meant they had certain attitudes regarding what counted as desecrating the dead. Along with a touchiness about accusations of doing so. But she was relieved to see several embarrassed faces, and more people nodding thoughtful agreement.

“And before you bring up the food and clothes,” Nie Mingjue said, just as Lan Xichen was opening his mouth to likely do exactly that, “I should point out that technically speaking, he’s been in illegal confinement since he woke up. Yes, we’re doing it to keep him safe, but for all intents and purposes we’re pretty much holding him prisoner. Basic necessities are something *we* owe *him*, not the other way around.”

That drew a number of frowns and offended looks, and Wen Qing quickly raised a hand. “Yes, the fact that we cannot communicate effectively with Wei Wuxian at the moment is a large part of that particular situation. However, that brings me to my second point, Manager Lan. Which is that Wei Wuxian does not currently speak any modern language. He also does not know where or even *when* he is.” She shook her head. “Under the current conditions, any ethical review board would consider any consent he might give invalid, because it would not be *informed* consent by any reasonable measure. Which means,” she concluded, moving her eyes slowly over the table before finally stopping on Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen, “until Wei Wuxian has learned our language and adapted to the modern era, even *he* cannot legally authorize any research.”

From the murmurs and expressions of dismay and chagrin around the table, her point was – finally – starting to sink in. “But that could take a month and more! What are we supposed to do until then?” someone groaned.

“I would recommend revising your research plans to reflect the fact that you will be working with a living subject,” Wen Qing replied… well, as mildly as she could manage, given that she’d been trying to push this point for a week, when it should have been obvious. “Our current circumstances mean we cannot immediately request a review committee to clear them, but that means every proposal will be under even more exacting scrutiny when we do publish. Director Lan can then devise a new project plan.” She stood. “Now, as Mr. Nie has said, there is much we need to do today. So unless there are any questions…?”

“Just one.”

She turned, raising an eyebrow at Lan Qiren.

He glowered at her. “You stated there were three reasons why Xichen’s suggestion was unacceptable. You have named two. I see no reason for you to hold back your objections at this point.”

Hm. Someone was feeling bitter about being called out in public. Pity he had refused to listen every time she’d done it privately.

Ah well. He’d asked. “Director Lan, if you cannot see the ethical problem with using a debt to coerce a young man who currently has nowhere else to go into submitting to the seizure of his belongings and violation of his person to satisfy our curiosity, then I have *profoundly* overestimated your moral character.”

Lan Wangji paused midway up the stairs leading to the old monastery complex from the empty office he had used for his video call and just… *breathed* for a moment, gathering the tension of the morning into his lungs to be released with every steady, measured exhale.

He’d known it was going to be a long morning, of course. It was still a shock to realize just how wrung out he’d felt by the time he’d been able to escape.

The initial meeting with the project participants had been bad enough, and they’d deliberately planned that to deflect attention from Lan Wangji’s role. But after that had been a private meeting with Lan Qiren. Ostensibly to lay out a more detailed plan for how the project would proceed.

Lan Qiren, of course, had not been pleased about being called out in public. Especially given that they had, for all intents and purposes, carried out an internal coup of the project’s management. He also was no fool; he knew perfectly well that if they’d moved Wei Wuxian out of the lab, Lan Wangji *had* to have been involved.

Wen Qing had no patience for any of it.

“I *warned* you,” she’d told his uncle bluntly. “I warned you that people on the project were disregarding the protocols that *you* agreed to put in place, and I warned you that the project plan needed to be revised to reflect the fact that your primary subject is a *living person*. This

situation should never have been allowed to progress to the point of endangering Wei Wuxian!"

Lan Qiren had continued to bristle, to Lan Wangji's utter lack of surprise. He was well familiar with his uncle's pride. Lan Qiren would never acknowledge that he was wrong. Even when he knew that it was true. Perhaps especially then.

However, for all that he did it in the poorest grace possible, by the end of the meeting he had effectively agreed to cede final decision-making authority regarding access to Wei Wuxian to Wen Qing, so long as she and Lan Wangji kept the rest of the researchers updated regularly on their progress.

So functionally, no particular change. Except that now they were the ones with the power to say *no*.

The look of relief on Lan Xichen's face at that decision had almost made Lan Wangji regret some of the less-than-charitable thoughts that had been curdling in the back of his mind since even before the previous morning's fiasco. He had no doubt that his brother would have *tried* to lay down the law to the other researchers, now that the gravity of the stakes was no longer an abstract "should" in his mind… but better to take that burden off his shoulders, so that he could focus on organization and scheduling without the added pressure.

Given what Nie Mingjue had grimly pulled them aside after the meeting to tell them, he was grateful that his brother was out of the direct line of access for another reason.

The place where Lan Wangji had paused on the stairs was something of a blind turn, at the edge of a steep climb that was effectively impassable without taking the old stairs. If anyone was coming up the path behind him, he would see them long before they saw him.

Only after several minutes passed with no sign of movement did the tension in his shoulders ease.

Not that he thought he would have been followed, necessarily. At least, not by the members of the project team. They were largely thoughtless and somewhat entitled rather than malicious – with Jin Zixun a notable exception. But given what Nie Mingjue had discovered…

Wen Qing had gone chalk white. "Someone broke into the lab last night?"

Nie Zonghui's face had been grim. "Yes, Doctor. It looks like someone got their hands on a copy of the utility door key. They let themselves into the building, then went into the breaker room and shut down the power."

Which would have released all the electronic locks in the building, as a fire safety feature. Including the lab door.

And the intruder had entered through the same utility door that Wen Qing had used to get Wei Wuxian out of the building, only a scant handful of hours earlier. "Was it a protestor?" Lan Wangji asked, more in hope than expectation.

Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao traded grim looks. “I have my doubts,” Nie Mingjue said flatly. “A sufficiently prepared protestor might think of cutting the power, but knowing the layout of the lab well enough to go straight to the breaker and hit *just* the right switches?”

“Not just that,” Meng Yao said fretfully. “Before they went in, they managed to shut down the security system. Including the cameras. And…” He grimaced, then squared his shoulders. “And then there’s the timing.”

Wen Qing’s lips tightened to a thin line. “I doubt it’s coincidence that this happened last night. When we only had a guard on the building, rather than at the lab door.”

Nie Mingjue nodded, short and sharp. “Long story short, if you ask me? This was professional. And whoever it was, they had up to date information on lab security.”

Ominous. “Su Minshan?” Lan Wangji asked, keeping his tone neutral.

“I doubt he was involved,” Nie Mingjue said. “Among other things, he’s not on the need-to-know list for security updates. And I’ve been keeping an eye on him.” His fingers drummed against his thigh. “That said? I wouldn’t be surprised if this has something to do with whoever got him those bullets.” He grimaced. “Or maybe I should say, I hope that’s the case. I’ve got one piece of shady business to track down, the last thing we need is *two* conspiracies bumping elbows.”

The words twisted like a sharp hook in his stomach. “Is Wei Wuxian in danger?” Lan Wangji asked bluntly.

Nie Mingjue’s cheeks puffed with a gusty sigh as he looked at Nie Zonghui and Meng Yao. “Right now, I don’t know enough to call that either way. He’s definitely the focal point of whatever’s going on – or more specifically, *Yiling Laozu* is.” He snorted. “The good news is, I doubt anyone actually is after *Wei Wuxian*. If only because no one’s going to *believe* the whole *Yiling Laozu lives!* business without damned convincing evidence, and there’s not actually much of that to be had outside of the camera footage – which we’ve got locked down – and actually encountering the man in person.”

“Ah.” Nie Zonghui nodded. “That’s why you’re not having us try to guard him this time.”

Nie Mingjue nodded. “Right now, the best way to protect him is to limit the number of people who can *find* him. Setting a guard would be counterproductive.”

Meng Yao worried at his lower lip. “Shouldn’t we at least know, though? If there really *is* someone on the inside, we need to be ready to respond quickly. Just in case things go wrong.”

Nie Zonghui chuckled. “If what you’ve told me about what he pulled off is true, then it’s probably not *Wei Wuxian* we need to worry about protecting… and I suspect he’ll come up with his own way of letting us know if there’s trouble.”

“Which could become its own problem,” Wen Qing noted.

Nie Mingjue had been smirking at Nie Zonghui's words, but he sobered at that, nodding. "To be honest, I wouldn't be so comfortable with this arrangement if we *hadn't* had that fiasco yesterday. But now we know that Wei Wuxian not only is very capable of defending himself, but also that given the option, he's willing to spook first and keep stabbing as a fall-back." He shrugged. "Another reason I wanted him out of that lab. He *can* be lethal, so better to give him escape options so that he doesn't *have* to be."

Meng Yao sighed. "I suppose that makes sense," he said, and winced. "And I suppose if there is an internal security problem, they'll have already flagged me as a potential weak link."

Nie Mingjue snorted. "That happened because Zixun is an ass, Professor Yao has turned convenient denial into an art form, and Xichen and Qiren were so determined to pretend that the situation was normal that they were rivaling Professor Yao in his own art. And all of them have a habit of forgetting the chain of command unless it works to their benefit. That said…" He grimaced. "You're *partially* right."

"Because with Wei Wuxian out of easy reach, the next step is to focus on the people who *can* find him," Nie Zonghui noted.

"Which means you two need to be careful," Nie Mingjue said bluntly to Wen Qing and Lan Wangji. "You in particular, Professor Lan."

Lan Wangji nodded. It was, after all, self-evident. Anyone who did know about Wei Wuxian – as opposed to *Yiling Laozu* – would be aware that Lan Wangji *had* to be in contact with him, regularly, in order to continue the all-important language lessons. Which meant that following Lan Wangji would be the easiest way to discover Wei Wuxian's new location.

Of course, in actuality he couldn't *lead* them to Wei Wuxian, since his own home would be the one destination no stalker would question. But he would quickly give them away if he simply stayed in his home for hours on end, particularly given that he'd already established a pattern for spending most of his day with the man.

They'd brainstormed a few options for subterfuge on that point. At the time, he'd considered their precautions pessimistic, even verging on paranoid. Now… he fully intended to pull Nie Mingjue aside in private to see if they could refine those plans.

Although after hearing Wen Qing's comments on how ably Wei Wuxian had followed her lead when crossing the campus, he had one thought of his own to add, which was why he'd quietly supplied himself with a campus map.

After all, one thing any observers would not anticipate was Wei Wuxian becoming *actively involved* in the subterfuge, when they saw him as a passive object.

And if riding *on* the flying sword was indeed a Thing, that would give them even more options. Even if he was honest enough to admit that he wanted it to be real mostly because *flying on a sword*.

Standing on the stairs leading to the historic monastery complex and his home, Lan Wangji felt his breath catch all over again.

Cultivation was *real*. Not just fantasies played out in novels and shows. Not just a discipline connected to a particular religio-philosophical system of thought, but *real*, with tangible, *unbelievable* effects.

Lan Wangji had so many questions.

What could real cultivators achieve? Was Wei Wuxian the norm, or exceptional? How had people with such abilities fit into the social structure of their society – had they been aloof, focused solely on the quest for immortality and remote from the secular world, or had they been significant players in the unending power struggles of the chaotic age in which they lived?

Lan Wangji strongly suspected the latter. Power was temptation, after all. Even if no cultivator had ever succumbed to the lure of using their abilities for temporal, secular gain – something he found extremely unlikely – it would not change the fact that no warlord with an eye to empire would ignore the possibility that one *might*. Or of persuading one to do so on his behalf. Like it or not, cultivators *must* have been involved in the messy web of politics and wars and betrayals.

But if that was the case, then where were they in the histories? There was the sage Zhuge Liang, from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms – and knowing what he now knew, Lan Wangji had to wonder now how much of the mythologizing and tall tales associated with the novel had in fact been nothing of the sort.

He could *hear* the strangled spluttering from his former literature professors at the very notion.

Even so, the question remained. Where *were* the cultivators in the great histories? The semi-historical legends?

For that matter, where were they now? Surely something like this couldn't simply be *hidden*, especially considering the wars that had wracked China in the past century alone, the massive societal upheavals, the rise of *social media*. Urban fantasies about Masquerades and hidden supernatural societies aside, hiding anything like that was simply unsustainable.

And yet… it seemed equally impossible that something that could result in such abilities could simply be *lost*. So why was cultivation a thing of folklore and fiction now? What had happened?

So very many questions.

Questions he would not be asking any time soon. The moratorium on conducting research had to apply to him as well, after all. Him more than any other, in fact, given that he was now Wei Wuxian's host as well as his language teacher. He of all people could not simply barrage the man with potentially invasive questions that Wei Wuxian might feel obligated to answer. Especially about something that, one way or another, had been a well-kept secret across *centuries*.

For that matter, Wei Wuxian would likely be seeking answers to some of those same questions himself, given he'd spent a millennium and a half frozen in ice.

And they had far more important things to address at the moment, not least of them being a proper explanation of the events of the past twenty four hours. No doubt Wei Wuxian had *many* questions waiting for answers.

And more than that… Nie Mingjue had given Lan Wangji and Wen Qing some pointers on how to spot – and evade – someone attempting to follow them. But the man had bluntly admitted that it could take years to develop that particular skill set to the point of truly being effective.

Wei Wuxian had lived in a time of war and constant intrigue. He likely had *forgotten* more things about strategy, stealth and evasion than Nie Mingjue had ever learned in the first place. Which meant that he was the one best suited to helping them plan how this could work.

And it was time – past time – that they let Wei Wuxian have his own say in the decisions being made on his behalf.

Which would take a great deal of effort, not only because of the language barrier that they were only slowly wearing down, but because in many cases Wei Wuxian simply lacked the *context* needed. But Wen Qing was right; the man needed – more importantly, had the *right* – to have a say in what was happening.

Which meant he would need some time to plan the best approach to that particular conversation, he reflected as he stepped into the Jingshi at last, closing the door with a soft exhale of relief. Normally Wen Yuan assisted with that, but given that Lan Wangji neither wished to discuss their plans over digital communications nor to burden the teenager with the secret of what they were doing before necessary…

Come to think of it, he also needed to revisit the pantry; when last he'd stocked his supplies, he'd planned on feeding two people, not three…

Still thinking, Lan Wangji stepped out the back door onto the covered walkway, and stopped short.

Oh.

When he'd left that morning, Wei Wuxian had still been asleep. Which was something of a relief; so far as Lan Wangji could tell, while in the lab Wei Wuxian had never done more than cat naps, interspersed with meditation. Which… might perhaps have been more restful than they'd realized, if the lore was accurate, but that didn't necessarily mean it was an adequate substitute for sleep. And it was… gratifying, to know the man trusted Lan Wangji enough to allow himself to actually *sleep* in Lan Wangji's home.

But he was awake now, sitting on the veranda and looking out at the late morning sunlight shining on the garden and making the water of the pond glow emerald green with reflected foliage and refracted light. He must have either showered or bathed already; his hair was damp and flowed loose down his back and shoulders and even pooled on the boards behind

him, and he'd dressed himself in the spare clothing that Lan Wangji pulled from his own wardrobe for use until they could acquire more, now that they'd confirmed Wei Wuxian's approximate size. He'd even draped a spare towel over his shoulders to keep the shirt dry as he slowly worked a comb – a strangely delicate thing of pale lavender jade, the grip carved in the shape of a lotus flower – through his long hair, gently teasing out any unevenness before it could knot or tangle.

Lan Wangji only realized he was staring when the ache in his lungs reminded him that he needed to breathe as well.

He was hardly unaware that Wei Wuxian was strikingly attractive, even beautiful. There was a reason why that first photograph had captured attention, as well as no shortage of hearts and imaginations, around the world, and launched a whole new subgenre of fiction in the process. He had not exactly been immune to the appeal; certain better-quality pieces had found their way onto his own shelves, after all.

But when Wei Wuxian had been Yiling Laozu, a figure untouchable beneath the weight of ice and ages, it had been a purely aesthetic sort of awareness. Even after he'd awakened… on some level, it had still felt utterly surreal; one might as well long after a dream, or… well, a fictional character in a novel.

But now, sitting on Lan Wangji's veranda with the morning sun gleaming on long black hair, face relaxed and peaceful, he looked very, very real.

Then he glanced over his shoulder, silver eyes brightening in a dazzling grin of welcome, and Lan Wangji abruptly realized that he might be in trouble.

OMAKE:

WQ: I suggest letting Wei Wuxian stay at your house.
LWJ: Hm, has she forgotten I'm gay? Oh well, I'm sure it won't be relevant.

LWJ: Oh no. I forgot that I'm gay.

NOTES:

(I almost managed to fit this in the end notes! …except that I only had about fifty characters of margin left, and unfortunately, the html code required to include italics and such also count towards the total. So close!)

Wei Wuxian: demonstrating the important skill of active listening despite not understanding a single word said.

People love snarking about the anachronistic potatoes in MDZS… but Wei Wuxian's beloved chilies are *also* a New World addition to Chinese cuisine! So this particular Wei Wuxian has never encountered them before…

And even more fun, toilet paper is *not* an anachronism, because yes, there's mention of using paper for wiping in China as early as the sixth century!

I thought about having Wen Qing's confrontation scene take place with just Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen in attendance, which would be the politic and polite way of doing things. She promptly reminded me that politic and polite was how the situation happened in the first place, because politic and polite makes it easier for people to ignore what they don't want to hear. Which, after all, is one of the themes of MDZS: willful blindness in favor of a more comfortable narrative enabling bad actors. So.

Regarding the Jingshi: since the novel never really describes the Jingshi and I don't know that much about traditional house styles for Suzhou, I'm cheating a little and using pastelcheckereddreams's tumblr post about the layout of the Jingshi in CQL as a baseline, with the assumption that it would also have been modified over the centuries. As would the entire complex; fifteen hundred years is a *very long time* for a living, breathing, actively inhabited area, and just because one generation is dedicated to keeping it in the old form, it doesn't follow that all prior generations did so!
(https://pastelcheckereddreams.tumblr.com/post/658720140457852928/the-untamed-locations-the-jingshi-静室-a-digital/amp)

Wei Wuxian scored *fourth* on the list of eligible young masters… in a setting where status and wealth come before anything else. Despite the fact that he has neither, and in fact is only an honorary *gongzi* in the first place. Yeah, he's squee material.

And then he smiled. RIP, random university girls who were *not* ready for that.

I can't help but be bemused by the fact that the Lan and the Wens are the only sects that seem to insist on making disciples from other sects wear their colors; there's no mention of it in the Jin-held conference at Phoenix Mountain, for example. I mean, it makes sense; the lectures are specifically about sending students to gain "the proper attitude" specifically under Lan Qiren, and his definition of etiquette is "be a Lan." And Wen Ruohan's goal is subjugating the other sects, while Jin Guangshan actually benefited by having the sects be distinct and divided – and thus it makes sense that he would let them differentiate themselves.

Speaking of: technically, the Gusu Lan lectures shouldn't have happened at all in this AU, because they aren't the "Gusu Lan" lectures, they're the *Lan Qiren* lectures – the novel is very explicit that they were developed and established specifically around Lan Qiren's (suspect, if you ask me) reputation as a teacher. But I wanted to keep the backstory of Wei Wuxian having spent time at Cloud Recesses as a teenager, for Reasons, so… handwave!

Oh, and just a side note – Lotus Pier was explicitly *not* burned by the Wens in the novel. When Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng are sneaking back, after Zidian released them, we get this scene:

The gates of Lotus Pier were tightly shut. Outside, lights glowed brightly. Fragments of moonlight flowed along the crystalline water. Dozens of large lanterns in the shape of nine-petaled lotuses floated by the dock in silence. Everything was the same as before. Yet, it was because of how everything was the same as before that it tormented the heart. (ExR translation)

The only physical damage inflicted on Lotus Pier itself in the war that we know of is Wen Chao removing the lotus symbols.

So why is it canonically rebuilt by the time of Wei Wuxian's resurrection? I'd say that's meant to be evidence of Jiang Cheng's insecurity. First, we get these lines when Wang Liangjiao is passing through Lotus Pier:

"Lotus Pier really is quite nice. It's so big. ***It's just that all of the houses are a bit old."*** *"All of the wood is black. The color is so ugly. It's not bright enough." "Madam Yu, you aren't a good mistress at all. Don't you know to decorate the place a bit? Next time, hang up some more red curtains. It'd only be prettier that way."* (ExR translation, bold added)

And then, when Wei Wuxian is looking around after the Second Siege, we get this:

The training field was two times larger. Each new building seemed to be taller than the previous, adorned with curving roof decor. It seemed grander than before and had more splendor. But, compared to the Lotus Pier of his memories, it had changed too much.

Wei WuXian felt a sense of loss from deep within. He didn't know whether the old buildings from the past were blocked behind these impressive new buildings or if they were torn down already.

After all, they were indeed too old. (ExR translation, bold added)

My read is, that's a deliberate echo. Everything about Wang Liangjiao is tacky and overdone and tasteless, and yet it's implied that her catty commentary jabbed at Jiang Cheng so much that he ultimately rebuilt Lotus Pier because of it.

Chapter 7: The Axe Handle

Chapter Summary

The penny drops.

Wen Yuan threw the door open before the second knock even had a chance to land.

Nie Mingjue chuckled. “Glad to be leaving this dump?” he asked with a knowing smirk.

Wen Yuan grinned sheepishly. “Yes,” he admitted. After all, there wasn’t much point in pretending he hadn’t been waiting right at the door from the moment he finished packing.

Granted, *dump* wasn’t really doing the dorm justice; all things being equal, it was a very nice suite, with a kitchen and a bathroom and a lovely view out towards Caiyi from the windows. If he had to live for two weeks as basically a hermit, he could think of worse places to be.

But it had definitely been a weird experience. He’d been *so sure* that he was going to get *so much done*… and to be fair, he really had. But he’d also had some moments where he sort of *blinked* and then realized that it was three hours later than he’d thought and he’d somehow gone from research to Wiki-walking to reading a webnovel that was just… objectively *bad*.

Not to mention the gaming binge he’d gone on that one evening that resulted in *Jin Ling* asking why he was up so late.

Jin Ling. Expressing concern without having his arm twisted or blood being involved. That was the point when Wen Yuan had admitted that he might have to be more deliberate in his stress management strategies.

Although, in his defense: that had been the night after the Flying Sword Incident, and his brain had been buzzing with *cultivator* and *how could Director Lan let that happen* and he’d known that Aunt Qing and Professor Lan and Nie Mingjue were planning to do *something* about it but he hadn’t known *what* and…

Yeah, things had been a little crazy.

“That all your stuff?” Nie Mingjue asked, nodding to the bags stacked by the door.

“Yeah, I think that’s everything,” Wen Yuan said, and hesitated. “Um, maybe I should take that one…”

Nie Mingjue had already grabbed the bag in question, eyes widening at the unexpected weight as he suddenly found himself adjusting his stance for better leverage. “*Ancestors*, kid, what did you put in this thing? Bricks?”

Wen Yuan rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, those are mostly my textbooks, so… pretty much.”

Nie Mingjue huffed, slinging the bag over his shoulder and then grimacing and adjusting it so no hardcover corners were digging into his back. “Pretty sure the packs we carried in Basic weren’t this heavy – and definitely not so pointy,” he said dryly, even as he reached down to grab another bag with his other hand. “And you schlepped all this up here from the bus stop?”

“Uncle Ning helped,” Wen Yuan admitted, hastily picking up the last two bags himself.

Nie Mingjue chuckled at that. “Okay, that I can believe, I’ve *seen* some of his photography kits,” he acknowledged, and then stepped back from the door, gesturing for Wen Yuan to go ahead of him.

A thrill went through Wen Yuan as he stepped out of the dorm – which was silly, since he’d made a point of getting out for walks and to do exercises whenever the campus was quiet, in the interests of not going *completely* stir crazy. And it wasn’t like things were actually going to change all that much, given everything that had been going on, much as he’d *wanted* to be more involved…

But still! Finally, things were *happening*!

Nie Mingjue cast a smirk over his shoulder as he took the lead. “Someone’s excited,” he noted, openly amused.

Wen Yuan flushed and hastily tried to correct his stride to something at least *pretending* to be properly mature and dignified, rather than bouncing like Lan Jingyi with an all-you-can-eat barbecue coupon in hand. “I am,” he admitted anyway. “I know I won’t be able to visit with Wei Wuxian like we’d planned,” and if he was mad about the stubborn blockheads on the project making that necessary, well, that was his business. “But it’ll be nice to at least be helping out at *less* of a distance.”

Nie Mingjue cast a sidelong look at him as they turned onto the path that led to one of the quieter sections of campus, towards one of the buildings that acted as a student clinic when classes were in session; Aunt Qing had brought Wen Yuan there with her a few times when he was younger, when she’d been working and there was no one to watch him. “And you’re not bitter about that at *all*,” the security chief said dryly.

Wen Yuan fought the impulse to look away, even as he felt the flush on his face heat up. Busted. “I’m mad at Professor Yao and Jin Zixun,” he said, carefully precise. “How can they *do* that? Get so caught up in what they want that they just… stomp all over everything?”

Truth be told, he was angry at Director Lan and Lan Xichen, too, but that was a different sort of angry, mixed up with disappointment and constantly sort of bumping into the way they’d both supported his studies with Professor Lan, Lan Qiren’s pride in his academic accomplishments and Lan Xichen’s willingness to adjust schedules to accommodate Wen Yuan and his friends when they came to visit. He wanted to get his own head sorted out before he tackled how he felt about their actions.

Then he did look away, because… Well. *Honesty is important.* "I know you and the others aren't telling me where Wei Wuxian is now because you don't want the rest of the project pressuring me into telling – and that was probably a good idea," he admitted. He'd gotten a few "cultural sensitivity" requests right after the change that had been blatant fishing for information, and being honestly *sure* that he couldn't give anything away by accident had been a small comfort.

Although Jin Zixun's subsequent attempt to draw him into speculating "as pals" had been flat-out ridiculous. He'd *met* Jin Zixun. It had been downright satisfying to shut that down.

Though he was pretty glad that Nie Mingjue had made a point of keeping where *he* was staying on the down-low, too.

So yeah, he got why he couldn't know where Wei Wuxian was staying, but… "I just… worry," he concluded at last, a little awkwardly. Because he *knew* it was silly; Wei Wuxian was a *cultivator*, with actual real cultivation powers! And he trusted Aunt Qing and Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue, really…

But Wei Wuxian had literally *caught a bullet* for him. And he was cheerful and funny and had treated Wen Yuan like someone worth listening to when they could barely communicate. How could he *not* worry that the man was doing okay?

Okay, yes, and it was kind of frustrating to be on the edges of something *this big* only to get shuffled to the side because he was a kid. Just a little.

And Nie Mingjue was giving him an odd look now, like he was reevaluating something. "So you knew you weren't going to get to visit with the guy, and you kept up the quarantine anyway?"

Wen Yuan shrugged. "I mean… yes? I'll be staying with Professor Lan, and he *is* working with Wei Wuxian. So anyone staying with him needs to follow quarantine rules too, or he won't be able to do his job, right?"

Nie Mingjue's huff was as much sardonic as it was amused. "So basically what you're saying is that we need more teenagers on the project to raise the average maturity level," he muttered, not quite quietly enough to actually keep Wen Yuan from hearing every word.

Wen Yuan snickered. Because, well, Nie Mingjue wasn't *entirely* wrong. If nothing else, the average teenager was probably way more used to being told *no* than a bunch of big-name scientists…

But he could just picture how the guys would react. Lan Jingyi would *flip out*, and Ouyang Zizhen would be right there with him, screaming and running in circles probably. While Jin Ling would huff and puff and try to play it all cool and unimpressed and fool exactly *nobody*.

Oh man. He really, *really* hoped he could break the news to them in person, once the project was ready to go public with the big news.

But that reminded him of something much less amusing. He hesitated for a moment, but there wasn't anyone nearby to overhear, so… "Have you found out anything? About the break-in?"

Nie Mingjue didn't respond for a moment, and Wen Yuan was just bracing himself for the kid treatment when the big man sighed. "Hells, you're the one who got shot at, you deserve to know. Problem is, there's not much *to* know."

Wen Yuan swallowed uncomfortably. He *really* didn't like thinking about those chaotic minutes in the lab, or just how close he'd been to getting really hurt – maybe even *killed*. "You haven't caught them?"

Nie Mingjue grimaced. "Unfortunately, I don't have much to go on. Nothing's happened since the break-in, and honestly? That worries me."

Wen Yuan's heart sank. "But… shouldn't that be a good thing? That nothing's happened?"

The security chief gave him a sidelong look, a corner of his mouth quirking upward in a smile that didn't look amused at all. "Problem is, kid? Nothing's happened *that we know of*. No news is only good news if you can reasonably expect to *hear* the bad news. As things stand? We know *someone* is trying to meddle. But they covered their tracks well, so we don't know who or *why*. Which means that unless they slip up, the ball's in their court; not much we can do but wait and watch for the next move. And hope we're not missing something."

Well, that was moderately terrifying, and Wen Yuan had a sneaking suspicion that he was never going to read spy novels in quite the same way ever again. "What about Su Minshan? You fired him, right?"

"Fired and handed off to the police," Nie Mingjue confirmed. "Should have done *that* way sooner, but I was hoping to find out where the bullets came from." He made a face. "Unfortunately, once it finally sank in just how deep in it he was for waving an *illegal lethal weapon* around, he clammed up hard. I don't have the power to actually arrest someone, so."

Wen Yuan hesitated. "Weren't you worried about him telling people? About… you know." He wasn't sure what the plan was for telling the world that *Yiling Laozu is alive* – he wasn't even sure there *was* a plan – but he was pretty sure having the word come from the guy who had a horror movie flip-out and started *shooting* at people was not the way to do it.

"Meng Yao's pretty sure he won't," Nie Mingjue said. "He's helping coordinate the investigation for now; he's way better at the playing-nice, cloak-and-dagger nonsense than I am." He shrugged. "Su Minshan is all tough-guy ego; he knows that unless he can cough up evidence, talking about the famously frozen guy coming to life is just going to make him sound crazy. Not to mention he'd have to cop to freaking out."

Wen Yuan bit his lip. He wasn't sure he liked the thought of *no one would believe him anyway* about something that was *true*, even if they'd be in trouble if someone did believe him. But also… "Are we sure no one would believe him? Because… that break-in doesn't make sense unless someone did know."

“Hard to tell,” Nie Mingjue admitted. “My guess is that word hasn’t gotten out yet; it’s not exactly the sort of thing people would keep quiet about. But whoever passed the information about the security change along…” He shook his head. “I’ll be honest, kid – I’d rather you weren’t in the middle of this.”

“I sort of wish I weren’t, either,” Wen Yuan admitted softly.

Which wasn’t something he could admit to Professor Lan or Aunt Qing. If they got even a hint of something that looked like second thoughts, they’d pack him up and make him go home!

But he’d gotten to know the security chief over the past two weeks. Nie Mingjue understood the difference between knowing a situation was scary and wishing it weren’t, and not wanting to be involved.

For that matter, he thought Wei Wuxian would probably understand the difference, too.

Nie Mingjue gave him a knowing sort of nod as they approached the clinic door. “Well, the fact is you are in the middle of this, and have been from the minute everything went crazy,” he said bluntly. “Which is part of why I’m backing the plan for you to stay with Lan Wangji. Frankly, it’s probably the safest place for you at the moment.”

Wen Yuan blinked. “Did you assign him extra security or something?” he asked, glad his voice came out steady without betraying the weird little twist in his gut. Because his head knew that Professor Lan wasn’t invincible, but the man had always *felt* like he was somehow beyond the reach of anything bad. Logically he knew otherwise, but…

Nie Mingjue just grinned like he knew a secret. “You’re about to find out. And he had better have a camera ready when you do. You got everything you’ll need for the day in that?” he asked, nodding to the smaller daypack on Wen Yuan’s back.

“…Yeeeees…?” Wen Yuan answered, eyeing the man suspiciously. That camera comment was *ominous*.

Nie Mingjue deftly plucked the other bags from his hands. “Then I’ll drop the rest of this off at the Jingshi. You head on in; the Doc and Professor Lan will go over the plan with you.” Then he strode back up the path again, not lingering for Wen Yuan to press him on what *that* was supposed to mean.

Wen Yuan hesitated for a minute, then sighed, shook himself, and opened the clinic door. “The plan” probably meant logistics and scheduling, right? He wasn’t sure why they’d do that at the clinic rather than an office or something, but maybe Aunt Qing wanted to do a medical check-in or something.

The front office of the clinic was empty; this particular branch didn’t get used during summer break, since most of the students were away. But the lights were on, and he could hear familiar voices coming from one of the exam rooms, the door standing open a few centimeters.

When the front door closed behind him, the voices paused. “A’Yuan?” Aunt Qing called.

Wen Yuan gripped the strap of his backpack and grinned, his earlier excitement bubbling up again. “It’s me!” he confirmed.

Someone made a startled exclamation, and he blinked. That didn’t sound like Professor Lan *or* Aunt Qing, but he couldn’t imagine who else would even be there.

“Come on back,” Aunt Qing called, and he blinked, because she sounded like she was suppressing a laugh. Curious now, Wen Yuan headed for the open exam room…

And stopped short, jaw dropping.

Wei Wuxian grinned brightly, waving enthusiastically from where he was perched on the edge of the exam bed. “A’Yuan! Hello!”

Wen Yuan blinked. Blinked again.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t wearing the beautiful ancient robes he’d had in the ice. Instead, he was wearing a soft evening blue button-up that Wen Yuan was quite sure he’d seen Professor Lan wear, except that rather than buttoned up properly he’d left it open over a black shirt, with white linen slacks that *definitely* were Professor Lan’s, the cuffs rolled up to accommodate the worn boots. And with his hair tied back in a loose, messy bun—

Wait. That wasn’t loose or messy at all – it just looked that way because there was over a meter of hair bound up in that thing. Just, no one was used to seeing hair that long, so it *looked* like a more normal sort of long hair wrapped up in a sloppy, careless twist.

Dressed like that, with his long hair hidden… Wei Wuxian could honestly pass for just another graduate student. Okay, maybe a grad student out of a movie where they picked the prettiest people possible as actors, and the long hair would probably have Jingyi making awkward comments about confidence in manliness, because his foot had a bad habit of landing in his mouth. But Wei Wuxian definitely *didn’t* look like a magical cultivator who’d been frozen in ice for a thousand and a half years.

Which, yeah, had been the point of getting him new clothes… Wen Yuan just hadn’t really pictured the results before.

The bright sunny grin was the same, though… and he looked *distinctly* amused. Probably because Wen Yuan was still gaping.

Which. Shaking himself, Wen Yuan managed to look away and turn instead to Professor Lan, who was standing patiently to one side of the room. “Um… what’s going on?”

Professor Lan wasn’t smiling… but Aunt Qing was definitely smirking, and *now* he understood that comment about cameras. Augh.

“We will explain,” the professor said.

“That went well,” Wen Qing murmured, watching as Wei Wuxian and Wen Yuan bent their heads together over the print-out of Wei Wuxian’s medical report, slowly working through the language. Fortunately she’d made a point of teaching Wen Yuan the art of understanding such things – one of those valuable life skills that so few people ever were able to acquire.

“Mn.” Lan Wangji was watching them as well, a softness in his eyes that she could only pick out from his usual stony expression after years of exposure. After a minute, however, he turned to look at her. “The test results?”

“We lucked out,” she answered bluntly. Technically, this was a very grey area with regards to medical confidentiality, but Lan Wangji was currently responsible for Wei Wuxian’s basic needs, so he did need to know. “He doesn’t seem to have any allergies or dietary issues outside of lactose intolerance – and we expected that one.” It was still far more common than not in China, after all.

They’d also been fortunate in that Wei Wuxian had already been aware, in a practical sense, that there were foods that certain individuals needed to avoid. The medical system of his time had framed it as a kind of yin-yang incompatibility, but once he’d grasped enough of the language for Lan Wangji to broach the conversation – easier, now that Wei Wuxian was out of the lab and sharing space with the man – he’d been fascinated by the idea of being able to *test* for such conditions, rather than discovering them by chance.

He actually seemed fascinated by their medical system in general; witness the look of intent interest on his face as Wen Yuan talked him through the medical jargon of the forms. Which did make sense. Leaving aside the marks of physical trauma that he had clearly experienced personally, Nie Mingjue and Lan Wangji were both certain that he was a combat veteran. He would have seen people injured and dying. It wasn’t hard to see why new treatment methods would grab his attention.

Of course, that line of thought led to an entirely different set of problems.

Something in her expression must have given away her train of thought, because Lan Wangji studied her thoughtfully for a moment, then prompted, “The bad news?”

Wen Qing huffed. “Modern medicine is not exactly aligned with someone who can heal his own injuries by *sitting and not-thinking about them*.”

They’d discovered *that* little aspect of Wei Wuxian’s abilities early in his stay with Lan Wangji, when he’d accidentally burned his hand on the stovetop while Lan Wangji was demonstrating the use of it in a cooking lesson. Granted, the burn had been relatively minor – second degree, if that, from Lan Wangji’s description. Except that Wen Qing had *only* that description to go by, because the burn had been *healed and gone* in just a few hours.

As a trained surgeon, Wen Qing had spent some time researching the myriad of ways that a patient’s recovery could be helped or hindered. And meditation’s effects on stress levels was well-documented, as were the beneficial effects of a high overall level of fitness.

But healing even a minor burn in the span of just a couple hours? That was…

Well. Superhuman, so to speak.

Which… as a medical researcher, it was beyond exciting. She knew that scientists around the world were revisiting historic folk treatments and cures, puzzling out what was ultimately placebo effect and what had a genuine underlying physiological basis. Now, apparently, they would have to completely revisit the entire concept of qi and its potential effects.

At her request, Lan Wangji had sent her a selection of references regarding ancient medical and healing lore. Which had been *substantial*, because apparently nearly all known "magical" practices centered on health and healing in one way or another. Which made sense, really, she'd just never really thought about it in those terms before.

She was standing on the edge of an entire *world* of medicine and medical treatment that she hadn't even dreamed could actually be real only two weeks ago. It was *thrilling*.

Although she had no intentions of going anywhere near Daoist alchemy. Because the importance given to refined cinnabar *aka freaking mercury* was flat out hair-raising. She seriously had to wonder how many of the legends of so-called qi deviations stemmed from mercury poisoning. There certainly was a suspicious similarity to the symptoms.

And that was the problem. This whole concept was thrilling… from the point of view of a medical researcher. As Wei Wuxian's de facto doctor? She was *absolutely terrified*.

Because what if qi deviations *weren't* the result of mercury? What other hazards were associated with cultivation?

Even just looking at the positives: yes, he healed quickly and seemed hardier than average. To say nothing of surviving the whole *frozen in ice* business. But what was the cost of healing so quickly? What were the limits? How much risk was there of something going wrong from accelerating the healing process like that?

Not to mention all the other questions it raised. Given that he had an abnormal physiological response to injury – one that was at least somewhat under conscious control! – then what about his immune responses? Could she even trust the results of her allergy tests, if Wei Wuxian was capable of just… *mind-over-matter*ing his way past them? And what would happen if for some reason he ended up in a situation where suddenly he *couldn't* just override his own physiology, if he were unconscious or something?

And that led into yet another set of complications. According to Lan Wangji, who had asked on her behalf, Wei Wuxian had claimed that he almost never got sick. Was that related to his cultivation? If it was, would there be circumstances outside of the typical range of stressors that could hamper that resistance? And if so, would his baseline, unsupplemented immune system be stronger than normal… or *weaker* than average, because illnesses never actually got far enough to trigger it? Would vaccines even *work* on a system like that?

And what about diseases that primarily killed healthy young adults, because it was the overreaction of the immune system that actually killed? Could he simply override a cytokine storm? Or would he need to *know* what the reaction was to intervene effectively?

It was enough to make her head hurt.

And then there were all the other questions. Were cultivators vulnerable to certain ailments over others? Were there *treatments* that they had access to that others couldn't benefit from? Diagnosis methods?

Of course, those questions led back to the medical research side of things, which had its own complications. Not least of which…

She looked at Lan Wangji. "How did your meeting with the director go?"

"*Mn*."

Well. That was a singularly unhelpful response.

Fortunately, Lan Wangji seemed to recognize that he had been uncommunicative even by his standards. After a moment, he clarified. "Uncle was unimpressed by the quality of the revised research proposals thus far."

Wen Qing didn't quite suppress her snort. She'd *bet*. Anyone trying to submit a proposal with only two weeks to revise at the maximum was trying to get away with superficial tweaking, not addressing the *complete upheaval* of the existing project plans.

But that Lan Qiren was *also* unimpressed, enough so to express it in the update meeting… *that* was promising. It meant he'd worked past the denial enough to actually think like a proper scholar again. And that he'd finally availed himself of the reference materials she'd provided.

Lan Wangji added. "He has requested an updated timeline for the vaccinations."

Wen Qing sighed to herself. That, she'd expected. Once the limitations of what they could legally research when Wei Wuxian was unable to give valid consent had been spelled out, even the project members who had been taking her demand for quarantine seriously had largely given up on it; they hadn't seen the point when in-depth research was off the table for the time being. But that, of course, raised the looming question of when they *could* begin research, and how to judge at what point Wei Wuxian could agree to it. For now, they had settled on the vaccinations as a substitute time frame, since it would take at least a month or two of the regimen she'd planned before Wen Qing would feel safe fully lifting the quarantine requirements.

However.

"That will depend on you," she told Lan Wangji.

He looked at her, face the usual expressionless granite.

Wen Qing looked back at Wei Wuxian. He *looked* like all of his attention was on Wen Yuan, but she knew he was keeping track of the two of them as well, and listening as closely as he could.

Which was more than most would expect; his vocabulary had grown by leaps and bounds since even a week ago. But his conversational skills, particularly listening comprehension, had lagged somewhat, given the handicap of a teacher who never used four words when one plus context would do. It was obvious that following Wen Yuan's faster, more casual speech was demanding a great deal of his concentration.

So she didn't bother lowering her voice; the only thing that would accomplish would be to signal that she was saying something she didn't want overheard.

And frankly, if Wei Wuxian happened to pick up enough of the conversation to begin pushing for answers himself? Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. They couldn't stall the explanation forever, much as Lan Wangji seemed to be trying.

"If you think I'm going to start him on a vaccination program – vaccines that are based on making the immune system *work harder* – when he still has a *massive* emotional shock hanging like the sword of Damocles over his head? Think again," she said bluntly. "That is going to be a huge stressor and I want him well past it before we even think about stressing his immune system *intentionally*."

All the more so, now that she knew that his abilities as a cultivator had ramifications for his physical health. She didn't know how the ability to mind-over-matter injuries away might mean for cases of mental and emotional *stress*, but she was willing to bet that the outcome would not be a good one.

Lan Wangji's lips pursed ever so slightly, his gaze just a hint off as though he was looking more towards her ear than her eyes. All tells she associated with him knowing that someone had a point but mulishly not wanting to grant it. "Wen Yuan just joined us."

She huffed. Yes, part of the reasoning for having Wen Yuan stay with them in the first place was that her young cousin would be one more social bond for support when the full extent of Wei Wuxian's dislocation sank in. But it wasn't actually an answer to her question, and Lan Wangji knew that perfectly well. "He's here now," she countered. "Which means it's time to make some serious decisions, Lan Wangji. That is not a conversation you want to walk into flat-footed."

Lan Wangji didn't respond.

Wen Qing shook her head at him. On the one hand, it was nice to know that she rated as a close enough acquaintance for him to be sulky at her. That didn't make it *helpful*.

Not that she blamed him for not wanting to be the bearer of bad news. She was a doctor, she knew how hard it was to bring devastation down on someone, even as just the messenger. But avoiding the problem only delayed it. Not to mention…

"Professor Lan," she said, letting a hint of iron into her tone, "the man is *not stupid*. He *knows* we're not telling him something important. Thus far he's granted us the benefit of the doubt, but that doesn't stop him from drawing his own conclusions. Conclusions we can neither predict nor know how he'll act on them, because he's coming from a very different context and missing incredibly important information. Nor do we know how long his

patience will last. How long do we have before he decides he needs to go looking for answers on his own? And how long do you think this illusion is going to last once he does?"

Lan Wangji looked away. It wasn't as obvious as a wince, but it was clear he'd yielded the point. After all, all it would take to bring everything tumbling down would be Wei Wuxian deciding to go for a stroll down the mountain to Caiyi. Something he was perfectly capable of doing at any time, given that they were flat-out *relying* on his ability to get around the campus unnoticed at the moment.

She gentled her tone just a little. "Look, even if he doesn't actively go looking, it's going to come out, one way or another. It might take a while to figure out – *it's been over a thousand years* isn't something that you automatically jump to. But eventually he *is* going to find the rotted ax handle. He's going to pick up the wrong book or see a map and that will be it. Do you really want him to get hit with that unexpectedly and alone, or in a controlled situation where he has support and knows that at least we're being *honest*?"

The last one hit home; she could see it in how his shoulders dropped slightly. "…Let Wen Yuan settle first," he said. "Then I will explain."

Well. That was probably the best she could ask.

"He's really going to be staying with us?" Wen Yuan blurted as soon as they were safely within the secluded area around the historic complex.

Lan Wangji was impressed the boy had contained himself as long as he had. He'd been practically vibrating out of his skin ever since they'd parted ways with Wei Wuxian at the door of the clinic and set out across the campus.

"If you have concerns, alternative arrangements can be made," he said. After all, the need to keep Wei Wuxian's location secret meant that Wen Yuan had not been given a chance to offer his own opinion on the change in plans.

Somehow, he didn't think the boy had any objections. Particularly given the extremely teenage *adults are so dumb sometimes* look that Wen Yuan didn't *quite* succeed in hiding.

Followed by a moment of hesitation, as Wen Yuan chewed his lip nervously. "I mean… I'm mostly worried about *me*," he admitted. "You're hiding where he is for a *lot* of really important reasons. What if I mess up and give it away?"

Ah. A valid concern, and somehow he was not surprised that *that* would be the first thing on Wen Yuan's mind. "I have faith in your judgment and discretion," he said, and gave the boy a steady stare. "But do not forget to think of yourself. If you feel unsafe at any time, speak."

After all, the situation was still very precarious, for all that whoever had broken into the lab had made no obvious moves since. In all honesty, Lan Wangji thought he would prefer it if they had. At least then he would *know*. As matters stood, he had no way of knowing if nothing had happened, or if they simply hadn't noticed it.

Still. He was fairly certain that at least their subterfuge regarding Wei Wuxian's new lodgings had remained effective.

It helped that improbability lent its own kind of anonymity. No one *expected* to see the Yiling Laozu in a living, breathing, bright-eyed man strolling across the campus. Even those who knew about his revival would never expect him to be out and about, let alone on his own and unescorted. If only because many of them still defaulted to thinking of him as an inanimate object out of habit.

The system was not without risks. But in modern clothes, with his hair tied back to disguise its length, Wei Wuxian could easily pass for just another student staying on campus for summer classes or work. And while Yiling Laozu's face was famous, there was a world of difference between the slack, sleeping face within the ice and the open-eyed, active features of a man who was awake and moving. Assuming anyone saw him in the first place; thus far, he'd simply disappeared after leaving the Jingshi, to meet Lan Wangji at either the clinic or a meditation hall in one of the outer parts of the historic complex that Lan Qiren had reserved for their use. Maintaining the illusion that Wei Wuxian was housed elsewhere on campus, rather than living with Lan Wangji in his own home.

If nothing else, the arrangement at least ensured that no one would go crazy from being cooped up in a confined space for days at a time.

Still, Lan Wangji couldn't help feeling uneasy; he was well aware that *he* was the weak point in their little shell game. If whoever arranged the break-in did know that Wei Wuxian was alive, then Lan Wangji was the obvious lead to find where they'd hidden him. They wouldn't even need to do something so obvious as attempting to follow him; all it would take was someone breaking into the Jingshi while he was away, and they would quickly figure out that Wei Wuxian was staying there.

He'd done his best to explain his concerns to Wei Wuxian; the man deserved to know what was going on and *why* they were being so secretive. It had taken some time, especially since Wei Wuxian was clearly puzzled about why there would be such a fuss around him in the first place.

Wen Qing was right; Wei Wuxian not only deserved but *needed* to know what had happened to him. Lan Wangji just hadn't figured out how to approach him about it yet.

But then, when Lan Wangji had mentioned his concerns about the Jingshi being broken into, Wei Wuxian had offered to *set wards* on the building.

Wards. Nie Mingjue had sputtered like cold water hitting the bottom of an over-heated dry kettle.

Lan Wangji had to admit that his own thoughts hadn't been much more coherent than that, when Wei Wuxian had offered to let him watch as the man created the wards. Watching Wei Wuxian set intricately inked paper in various locations had not been all that different from various ceremonies he'd watched, although with significantly less ceremony involved…

Then they'd *flared*, red light limning every surface and curve and corner in a shimmering, half-seen veil before the light didn't so much fade as sink into wood and plaster and stone, gone from sight but ready to surge forth again at the first hint of danger.

No, he did not dispute Nie Mingjue's sputtering in the least. After that display, he'd gone to write up his formal notes only to realize he'd just spent thirty minutes staring at a blank page, at a loss for how to even *begin* to articulate what he'd witnessed.

The floating sword had been shocking, but… isolated. This…

He'd just watched an expert in an art that he hadn't thought *real*, working with the same calm, confident focus of a master builder or gardener, or maybe a painter or musician. Somehow, it was the sheer *normality* with which Wei Wuxian had approached the entire process that had finally driven the reality of it home.

So his home was perhaps not so unprotected as it seemed. Of course, the wards alone would betray them… but anyone who set them off would be caught in place.

Lan Wangji knew that Nie Mingjue was biting back *all* the questions about those wards. And seriously considering deputizing Wei Wuxian the moment he had the opportunity. But for now… well. It was, at least, another layer of security. All the more important, to Lan Wangji's mind, now that Wen Yuan had joined them.

The boy himself had slung his backpack around to hang from one shoulder as he rummaged through the contents, almost tripping on the uneven stones of the path as they moved into the wooded area. Apparently finding what he was looking for, he hesitated, looking at Lan Wangji. "So, um… I brought a present for him, sort of? If you think it's okay." Pulling out a slim volume, he handed it to Lan Wangji.

Accepting it, Lan Wangji thumbed through the pages thoughtfully. Each spread of pages was a paired set; classical poetry in its original form on one page, and the same poem translated into the modern vernacular on the facing page. A learning tool for the student of classical literature. Closing the book, he looked at Wen Yuan.

The boy shrugged slightly. "I know poetry isn't the same as regular speech, and writing isn't talking… but you mentioned that one problem was just exposing him to *enough* stuff generally. I thought, this would be enough for him to start working through the *patterns* in the language, the way things have changed." He hesitated. "I found some other books, too, but those will have to wait until after… you know. We explain everything."

True enough, and a good thought. Although. "Li Bai?"

Wen Yuan tilted his head. "He's from the Tang Dynasty, so Wei Wuxian wouldn't know him. Which… I mean, maybe it would be better to do this with something he already knows, but he'd probably appreciate something new to read." He grinned. "And I thought he'd like the sense of humor."

True. Wei Wuxian had already been familiar with most of the works from the disunited period that Lan Wangji had offered, which led Lan Wangji to suspect that Wei Wuxian had

lived in the late part of that era, possibly during the chaotic last decades that had seen the collapse of the Northern Wei, the betrayals of Hou Jing, the splintering of the Liang dynasty, and ultimately the rise of the Sui and the reunification of China. Something new to read would undoubtedly be welcome; the man did not strike Lan Wangji as the sort to particularly enjoy going over the same material again and again.

Lan Wangji *might* be sulking a little at the fact that it hadn't occurred to *him* that this meant he'd had the opportunity to introduce the works of one of China's most beloved poets to Wei Wuxian himself.

And while Li Bai had lived in the time of the Tang, his determinedly apolitical stance meant that most of his best poetry, the works that would be selected for a book like this, wouldn't have much in the way of contemporary references to confuse the man. And Wen Yuan was absolutely correct that Wei Wuxian would love the humorous romanticism of Li Bai.

However. "How will you handle the annotations?" *Li Bai* might have been apolitical, but any commentary or explanation of his writing would naturally seek to ground it in the time and place of the writing.

Wen Yuan nodded to the book. "That's why I picked that one; all the notes and things are in the back."

Ah. Yes. Now he remembered – he'd specifically avoided that particular publisher when selecting texts for his students for that same reason, since he considered the annotations as important as the text itself for a modern learner. But for Wei Wuxian…

"I sort of figured that by the time we got to that part… well, he'd *know* by then," Wen Yuan concluded. "So I thought it'd be okay."

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes slightly, wondering if he was hearing Wen Qing's hand in that comment.

…Not that it wasn't true.

Instead, Wen Yuan hesitated, looking suddenly uncertain. "I mean… as long as you think that's okay?" he said tentatively. "I just thought… it might be fun to have an actual *project* to work on with him."

Lan Wangji considered that, and nodded. A dedicated project, something that they could make tangible progress on over time, would make an excellent counter to the slow and frequently frustrating process of language learning. And it would be good for Wen Yuan to have something specific that he could do with Wei Wuxian. Nodding, Lan Wangji passed the book back—

And paused suddenly as they rounded another turn, now well out of sight from the historic complex, and energy rippled at the base of his spine.

He really had no better way to describe it, other than perhaps what someone with synesthesia might call the texture of laughter, or perhaps of a playful kitten deciding whether or not to

pounce a tempting tail.

Very deliberately, he paused his steps, bracing himself, and therefore did not stagger at suddenly supporting the weight of another grown man as an arm was slung over his shoulder. “Hi!” Wei Wuxian said brightly.

Wen Yuan yelped, half-jumping into the air as he whirled about to stare wide-eyed at Wei Wuxian. The man simply laughed, wrinkling his nose playfully as the boy rallied himself and glared half-heartedly, subtly shaking his shoulders as if trying to dislodge the memory of being doused by cold water.

A movement Lan Wangji noted with interest, since it confirmed something he’d suspected for a while: that strange storm-and-sunlight sensation he sometimes noticed when Wei Wuxian approached was *not* his imagination. Not at all. And from the way that Wei Wuxian was also watching Wen Yuan’s reaction… he had the feeling that it was entirely deliberate.

He wondered what it meant.

Of course, it was entirely possible that it was simply a kind of courtesy warning before the man pounced on someone who might react badly to a surprise. If so, Lan Wangji appreciated the consideration.

Huffing internally, he shrugged the shoulder Wei Wuxian was leaning on, and tried not to let the momentary disappointment show when the man laughed brightly and let go, stepping around to face them properly in a swirl of black – he’d let his hair out to the usual high tail, now that they were out of public sight. Understandable; having the weight of it compressed into a single knot likely threw his balance off in subtle ways. And might well cause headaches if left too long.

Lan Wangji resolutely kept his hands relaxed at his sides and did *not* wonder what it would feel like if he were to reach out and catch that hair as it streamed past.

For the most part, he thought he was handling his extremely ill-timed and *highly* inappropriate crush… well enough, at least. Largely by doing everything in his power to pretend that it didn’t exist, or at least to restrict it to his thoughts only. The last thing he ever wanted was for Wei Wuxian to feel pressured to reciprocate Lan Wangji’s regard. Especially given that the man might well feel that he *needed* to do so, if only for added safety in an uncertain situation where he had no genuinely secure allies.

Lan Wangji thought he had succeeded well enough; at the very least, he hadn’t seen any signs that Wei Wuxian felt any discomfort in his presence. And the man’s tendency towards physical contact, leaning on Lan Wangji’s shoulders to look at something or poking him to get his attention, seemed to spring naturally from a naturally playful, mischievous, *tactile* temperament, rather than a forced performance.

And if Lan Wangji secretly enjoyed that tendency more than he should… occasional irritating jokes from coworkers aside, he was not actually made from jade.

Evidenced by the fact that he was, in fact, rather hungry at the moment… and by the utterly unsubtle way that Wei Wuxian was eyeing the bag in his hand, he was not the only one.

Amused, he transferred the bag to his other hand – deliberately ignoring the disappointed pout that he hadn't opened it instead – and then began walking again. After a few steps, however, he turned away from the trail leading to the Jingshi and onto one of the side paths.

Wen Yuan made a startled noise, hurrying to catch up after his surprise at the change in direction made him hesitate and fall behind. "Where are we… oh. Doesn't this go to…?"

"Mn. The weather is good," Lan Wangji said, keeping one eye on Wei Wuxian as the man strolled alongside them, face open and interested as he looked around, tilting his head slightly as the soft sound of flowing water began to grow louder.

He suspected that Wei Wuxian had explored the wider campus quite extensively at this point, taking advantage of the night hours when most people were asleep; he had noticed that, once out of the lab, the cultivator was still awake and active when Lan Wangji sought his bed, and given how late Wei Wuxian slept in the morning, Lan Wangji suspected that the man stayed up until the early hours of the morning. He doubted that Wei Wuxian stayed in the Jingshi the entire time.

But he also suspected those explorations were largely focused on the more dense areas of the main campus, with more to observe – not to mention that the man likely was also scouting ways to move about unnoticed, given the current arrangement. He was guessing that Wei Wuxian had spent less time exploring the wooded areas around the Jingshi, if only because they were less alien to him.

From the soft exclamation as the path turned again and then wound downwards to reveal the Cold Springs, Lan Wangji was fairly certain that at the very least, this was new to his guest.

Lan Wangji paused at the top of the slope, both to let Wei Wuxian take in the sight and to appreciate it himself. The Cold Springs had always been one of his favorite places in the historic complex. While the complex itself was ancient, heavy with history, the natural spring at the base of the dark stone cliff, bright sunlight catching on dark water and surrounded by the rich greenery of the woods, transcended simple *history* and stretched into *timelessness*. There was a deep quiet to the pools as well, one that ran far deeper than the rustling leaves and murmur of running water where the pools fed the small streams that ran through the woods.

A soft *splish* – and then Wei Wuxian yelped, pulling his hand out of the water and shaking it fiercely, sending water droplets flying to leave little circular ripples spreading across the pool. "It is *cold*!" he exclaimed, turning a dismayed look at Lan Wangji as if this was some personal betrayal.

Lan Wangji kept his face deliberately blank, even as Wen Yuan snickered at the theatrics. "They are the Cold Springs," he replied.

Wei Wuxian huffed, shaking a finger at him. "You are much cruel!" he said reprovingly.

So, not much, Lan Wangji was about to reflexively correct, before his thoughts were sidetracked when Wen Yuan nodded. “He really is,” the boy said sagely, and then smiled innocently at Lan Wangji when he gave Wen Yuan a *look*.

Wei Wuxian laughed, standing up from the edge of the pool. Tucking his hands behind his back, he began strolling along the edge of the spring, looking around as he walked.

Lan Wangji watched the cultivator out of the corner of his eye as he began laying out the luncheon he had packed that morning next to one of the stone benches placed discretely around the springs for visitors. On the surface, Wei Wuxian was walking casually, taking in the scenic surroundings with what appeared to be genuine enjoyment. But at the same time, there was something thoughtful in the way he moved around the spring, studying the water with an intensity at odds with the nonchalance of his movements.

It made him wonder. He knew from the old records that, not unlike the Jingshi, the Cold Springs had once been a place for the monks of Cloud Recesses to meditate. Would cultivators have done the same? Certainly the folklore surrounding the concept of cultivation emphasized the importance of discipline and deep meditation, and seeking out places of spiritual power.

According to geologists, the water of the springs would have fallen as rain and snowmelt on the mountain thousands of years earlier, trickling down through cracks in the stone before reaching the deep underground stream that eventually seeped forth again here. It was not hard at all to picture such a place as one of power as well as tranquility.

Not hard, but disconcerting – thinking about a place he had imagined from his youth as one of spiritual power, and realizing that it might *actually* be so.

Perhaps he could ask – later, when asking questions out of his own curiosity would be appropriate, rather than an abuse of privileged access. At the very least, he should wait until he knew that Wei Wuxian would feel secure in refusing to answer; the simple fact that cultivation had been consigned to folklore and fantasies strongly suggested that it had been a secret art, practiced by a select few.

For now… “Wei Wuxian,” Lan Wangji called. The lunch he’d prepared was laid out, and Wen Yuan was eyeing the spread with the hungry eyes of a perpetually ravenous teenager who was too well-raised to simply dig in without permission. It was time to eat.

While Lan Wangji had been distracted by his thoughts, Wei Wuxian had made his way over to the far side of the spring and was studying the cliff face, occasionally turning to look out over the trees to the peak of the neighboring mountain, dark against the bright blue of the summer sky. He looked… puzzled, with a subtle furrow between his brows as he studied the scenery. When Lan Wangji called, Wei Wuxian startled, blinking across the pool at them as he gathered his own thoughts from wherever they’d wandered.

He looked at the pool separating them. Grinned.

Then he stepped straight forward, *onto* the water. And proceeded to simply *walk across*, little ripples spreading across the surface with each footfall.

Wen Yuan was spluttering, having inhaled at exactly the wrong moment. Lan Wangji simply watched Wei Wuxian, allowing the boy a chance to recover his dignity… and also taking in this newest discovery. He had wondered how many of the stories of a cultivator's powers were actually truth; apparently *walking on water*, at least, was.

He hadn't yet dared ask if the xianxia classic of flying on a sword was actually possible in reality, but he was beginning to suspect the answer was *yes*.

It also hadn't slipped his notice that each new aspect of what Wei Wuxian could do was being revealed quite intentionally, with Wei Wuxian deliberately choosing moments when it would be least expected. It could easily be mistaken for showing off, and that was undoubtedly part of his motive given that mischievous grin…

But Lan Wangji had no doubt that it was also *selective*, with Wei Wuxian carefully calculating the specifics of where, when, and *what* exactly he showed them. Oh, he absolutely enjoyed their dumbstruck reactions – the man was an irrepressible mischief-maker. But every dropped jaw and wide-eyed stare was also *information*.

He wondered how much Wei Wuxian had learned from those reactions. And what he made of it. Certainly the man was aware by now that they were unfamiliar with cultivation and cultivators. Would that level of ignorance have been normal and expected in his time? Would certain groups be expected to be more aware than others? Or were cultivators fables and legends even in his time, with knowledge about them more fiction than fact even among the wealthy and powerful?

As Wei Wuxian approached the shore, Wen Yuan reached out and poked the water near the man's foot, plainly half-expecting it to be hard to the touch from the way he almost overbalanced when his hand encountered no resistance and only saved from an unpleasant dunking when Wei Wuxian laughed and caught him by the collar.

Wen Yuan's eyes narrowed at the broad, shameless smirk on Wei Wuxian's face, and for a moment Lan Wangji wondered if the usually responsible boy was about to give the water a much more serious smack – in the spirit of scientific inquiry and finding out what would happen if someone walking on the water's surface encountered a more serious wave, of course. Before Lan Wangji could do more than hastily wonder how to respond if the result was both of them falling into the frigid water, however, Wei Wuxian had stepped up onto dry land again, letting go of Wen Yuan once the boy's center of gravity was safely away from the water. Tugging his collar back into place, Wen Yuan pouted as Wei Wuxian dropped to a cross-legged seat on the ground and wagged a finger teasingly at him – then caught Lan Wangji's flat, unimpressed stare and flushed, clearly recognizing that he'd been about to cross a line.

Turning that same stare on Wei Wuxian only resulted in an unrepentant grin, unfortunately.

Lan Wangji sighed internally and picked up his chopsticks – and then deliberately selected a portion of bitter greens and transferred them to the man's bowl. Wei Wuxian huffed loudly, wrinkling his nose in theatrical annoyance before pointedly adding a serving of liangpi noodles to the greens.

Wen Yuan's face brightened when he saw the noodles. "You made spicy stuff?" he blurted, eyes sparkling as he scanned the spread again, noting the hot dishes mixed in among Lan Wangji's more usual fare.

Wei Wuxian grinned broadly. "I made it!" he declared with pride.

Deserved pride, at that; he'd made nearly a third of the dishes they'd prepared for Wen Yuan's welcome luncheon. The incident with the burned hand on the stovetop aside, Wei Wuxian was a relatively good cook – except that, having discovered chili oil and hot peppers, he tried to add them to nearly *everything*.

Lan Wangji was glad the man had discovered something he liked about the modern world. But his spice tolerance was absolutely terrifying.

Or at least *he* thought so. But Wen Yuan's eyes lit up when he tried a piece of mapo tofu. "It's *great*!" he said enthusiastically, even as he hastily reached for his rice to buffer some of the burn.

Lan Wangji settled back on the stone bench with his own selection of far more *reasonable* dishes, watching the two laughing together with a sense of bemusement. It had been two weeks already since Wei Wuxian had awakened from the ice – although perhaps he should consider that it had been *only* two weeks? And yet he still found himself struggling with the mental whiplash of how in one moment, Wei Wuxian was a mystical and mysterious cultivator from the distant past, and the next, a young man no older than some of Lan Wangji's own students, playing pranks and getting into a spice-tolerance competition with a teenager.

With the greatest whiplash, of course, being the realization that the "difference" was purely a matter of his own perceptions; Wei Wuxian was *both*, at one and the same time, and any disjoint came from Lan Wangji's own preconceived expectations.

He'd thought, that first week, that he'd successfully put the mystique of the Yiling Laozu out of mind when it came came to Wei Wuxian the living man. Apparently he hadn't. It should have been disconcerting, to suddenly transition to *living* with the man…

Should have been. And yet, it hadn't. Or rather, it had… but he found himself regarding the process almost *fondly*. Living with Wei Wuxian had been less a matter of dispelling the mystique than of grounding it in laughter and bright-eyed interest in *everything*.

Granted, it helped that he and Wei Wuxian had proved surprisingly compatible as housemates. Despite the fact that his previous hunch had proven correct: left to his own devices, outside the artificially monotonous environs of the lab, Wei Wuxian was *absolutely* a night owl. Lan Wangji had awakened after midnight once and glimpsed Wei Wuxian training with his sword in the garden, perfectly at ease in the night.

…Lan Wangji had, perhaps, watched the scene through his window far longer than was appropriate. But he was only human… and so much of Wei Wuxian's personality was bright enthusiasm and *bounce* that glimpsing the underlying core of strength and discipline was… striking.

Oddly, he suspected that it was that very difference in their preferred sleep patterns that made the system work so well. By the time Wei Wuxian rose, late in the morning, Lan Wangji had finished his morning routine and had time to flesh out the previous evening's notes, respond to emails, and make his plans for the day, while the evening hours gave Wei Wuxian his own time to use as he saw fit. Lan Wangji suspected that the training he had glimpsed that night was part of Wei Wuxian's own private routine; the man almost certainly spent time meditating as well, and of course exploring during the silent hours of the night when it would be easiest to go unseen, getting to know the area.

Lan Wangji did his best not to worry about that. Wei Wuxian was competent and capable… and, as Wen Qing had so succinctly put it, an adult in good health and of sound mind. Lan Wangji had done his best to explain the overall situation in terms Wei Wuxian would be familiar with; he had neither the ability nor the *right* to curtail what the man did in that knowledge.

He just had to keep reminding himself of that. Regularly.

Lunch finished, they worked together to pack away the leftovers. Of which there were quite a few; he'd planned for that, knowing from experience that one should keep snacks available when hosting a growing teenager. He suspected they would also be welcome to a physically active adult out and about into the early hours of morning. Once that was done, Wen Yuan pulled out the book of poetry, to first curiosity and then eager enthusiasm on Wei Wuxian's part.

Lan Wangji settled back on the bench, laptop open as he began composing the weekly status report that Lan Qiren had requested. It was an easy enough task, since it largely consisted of compiling and editing the daily notes he was keeping for himself. Made easier by the fact that they had, after due consideration, chosen to inform Lan Qiren of Wei Wuxian's whereabouts. It meant he could be more complete with his explanations, knowing that his uncle would then edit it down for the rest of the researchers.

Which meant, in turn, that he could keep part of his attention on his companions as they settled by the spring – Wei Wuxian actually pulling his boots off to dangle his feet in the water despite his earlier reaction to the cold – and began flipping through the book together, not actually working at reading it yet so much as skimming through the contents.

Midway through, Wei Wuxian snickered suddenly, pointing at something in the text with a knowing grin. Wen Yuan blinked, apparently puzzled… and then turned beet red, covering his face with both hands.

Lan Wangji carefully kept his gaze on the computer and did not smirk. Apparently Wen Yuan had forgotten that Li Bai was Lan Wangji's go-to exemplar for his "yes, that is a raunchy double entendre in your classical poetry" lecture.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Wei Wuxian ruffled the boy's hair with a grin before turning the pages to something a little more tame, obviously comparing the original text to the modern rendition.

Or at least attempting to do so; Lan Wangji was not certain how far Wei Wuxian's current skill in the language would take him. He thought that Wei Wuxian had thus far mastered perhaps three to four hundred words, and was comfortable with basic sentences. That level of progress that was nothing short of astounding, given that it had only been two weeks, and the multitude of handicaps he was operating under: the stresses of the situation, the lack of shared context, the limited environment meaning that there were entire categories of words he had yet to encounter.

At the same time, it was clear that there were limits to what he had learned – evidenced by the look of intent concentration on his face when Wen Yuan spoke. *Conversation* was much more than grammar and vocabulary, after all. Leaving aside the nuances of body language – nuances that had doubtlessly changed significantly in modern urban culture – there was also the simple necessity of training the ear to catch, interpret, and even *predict* what someone was saying. And that, Wei Wuxian had had very little opportunity to practice.

Through no fault of his own; much as it irked him to grant the point, Lan Wangji knew that the lack of conversational fluency was his own failing. Try as he might, casual conversation was something that… did not come easily. Particularly when his reflex was to stop and correct the grammatical errors, or seek out the *exact* word or phrase best suited to the intent, rather than settling for good enough for the sake of conversational flow.

Lan Qiren was not the only pedant in the family, it seemed.

Fortunately, Wen Yuan did not share that tendency. And his speech was far more casual and colloquial in style – better suited to Wei Wuxian's relaxed, cheerful bearing than stiff formality, in Lan Wangji's opinion. It was clear that over the course of just the one morning that he'd improved significantly.

Evidenced by a grinning comment that Lan Wangji did not quite catch, that made Wen Yuan splutter for a moment before the boy laughingly struck the water with his hand, sending a cold spray at Wei Wuxian. The cultivator yelped a protest, curling protectively around the open book – the reflexes of someone from a time when books would have been relatively rare and difficult to replace. From the dismayed look on his face, Wen Yuan had belatedly realized that as well – and then Wei Wuxian grinned and used his foot to flick cold droplets into the boy's face with remarkable accuracy.

Listening to the two playing, Lan Wangji looked back at the screen and his report, but his focus was no longer on the words.

He knew that he needed to tell Wei Wuxian the truth about what had happened. Moral imperative and ethical responsibility aside… Eventually, the word that the famed Yiling Laozu was alive *would* get out, and at that point the modern world would descend on them in all its relentless, chaotic tumult. It was mere luck – and the efforts of Nie Mingjue and his men, and Lan Qiren – that had kept the secret this long. Better that Wei Wuxian learn the truth now, to give him some time to adjust before he was plunged headlong into the maelstrom.

Just… not yet. He wanted to wait a little longer: to give Wei Wuxian time to feel more confident in his grasp of modern language, to get a little closer to fluency. To let Wen Yuan

get settled into his own role and relationship, so that Wei Wuxian would have a second person to lean on as he worked through that knowledge.

Hopefully, that would give Lan Wangji enough time to find some way to broach the conversation in the first place.

Not to mention seeking out evidence to offer, should Wei Wuxian quite understandably demand that he prove his claim. Thus far, he'd had little luck; it had been *too* long, the heavy hand of time rendering so much of the world unrecognizable.

Granted, evidence was not strictly necessary. As Wen Qing had noted, given time enough clues would accumulate naturally to show the truth of his words. But he wanted to be able to at least offer the kindness of a swift and undeniable *truth*, rather than compound the pain of loss with uncertainty or false hope.

And he still had time; that same lack of readily available evidence meant Wei Wuxian was unlikely to find the rotted ax handle – as Wen Qing had aptly put it – by chance. He had time to choose his words and seek his evidence.

He had time.

This is so cool*!*

Wen Yuan… was doing his best to at least *pretend* to be calm and dignified and properly Grown Up And Reliable. This was *important*, after all. He didn't want Professor Lan to think he'd made a mistake in letting Wen Yuan be a part of it.

But he couldn't help being excited!

He'd been a little worried about meeting Wei Wuxian again – after all, he'd left right after Wei Wuxian woke up. And he was just a teenager. Maybe Wei Wuxian wasn't that much older in terms of actual years – not counting the whole ice thing – but Wen Yuan knew from experience that guys like Mo Xuanyu who were okay with hanging out with teenagers were the exception rather than the rule. And Wei Wuxian… well, odds were good that he'd basically been acting as a real adult for years. Would he really want a… well, a *kid* following him around?

But Wei Wuxian had seemed genuinely glad to see him again! And he hadn't seemed at all bothered by Wen Yuan being younger, even when they'd sat down together to go through the medical reports and Wen Yuan had spent most of the conversation fumbling through half-complete explanations because even when he broke things down to simple terms, there were just *so many words*.

And the bilingual poetry book had worked even better than he'd hoped! Even if he *had* forgotten that some of the poetry got a bit, um, colorful. But as he'd thought, Wei Wuxian seemed to appreciate the wry humor, and to genuinely enjoy the more casual style that Li Bai had pioneered.

They'd even gotten into an impromptu competition over who could do the most ridiculously over-the-top recitation of one of the poems. Which had turned into practically a debate over interpretation, which was way more fun if you were *doing* it for fun. Like arguing over characterization in a xianxia show with Ouyang Zizhen, rather than a formal literary analysis report for school.

Across the table, Wei Wuxian glanced up from the paper he was sketching on, one eyebrow raised quizzically. Sheepish, Wen Yuan quickly shook his head and bent over his chemistry textbook again, not really wanting to explain that he'd been snickering at the thought of the *look* on Lan Jingyi's face if he ever learned that Wen Yuan had spent a whole afternoon with the super-cool ancient magic cultivator *nerding out*.

Not that Lan Jingyi had any right to throw stones. Wen Yuan knew perfectly well who contributed the most volume – in both senses of the word – to those debates with Ouyang Zizhen, and it definitely wasn't him.

Besides. Historically, if you wanted to be considered accomplished, it wasn't enough to be badass, you had to be a *cultured* badass. Of course Wei Wuxian would know about poetic interpretation and debate translation choices, that was what you were supposed to *do* as an educated man!

Plus, seriously, the fact that he knew enough of modern Mandarin that he *could* argue translation and interpretation, after only two weeks? Wen Yuan had been doing a lot of reading about second language acquisition, helping Professor Lan put together a plan of sorts for the language lessons. That Wei Wuxian had learned so *fast* was a whole different kind of badass.

Wen Yuan finished the last equation and closed his book with a sigh of relief. He'd go back and check his work later, of course, but right now, if he never had to look at another chemical formula again he would be *perfectly content*.

Pushing the book aside – free at last! – he glanced across the table, and blinked. He'd noticed that Wei Wuxian had been working on something while he'd been finishing his homework, but he'd assumed the man had been writing his own notes, or maybe painting something. But instead, he'd divided a piece of paper into thirds, and…

"Is that a lingfu?" he blurted, eyes wide. Because yes, Lan Wangji had told him about that in his daily updates, and had even sent him pictures of a few. But that wasn't the same thing as seeing one *in person*. Especially when he now knew that they actually worked!

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Yes. It is new protection ward."

Okay, somehow it was just kind of funny that he knew words like *protection* and *ward* but not, oh, *money* or *burger*. It did logically make sense; half the vocabulary lists that Wen Yuan remembered from his early English classes were things like… well, he doubted that Wei Wuxian had even *seen* a car or a superstore, let alone knew what they were. Of course his starting vocabulary would be things that referenced *his* context and experience.

But it was still kind of funny.

Leaning forward over the table, Wen Yuan stared in fascination as Wei Wuxian added another mark. He'd always thought that lingfu looked kind of, well, messy, even the super-simplified version that got used as talismans in xianxia shows. But watching one being made, he could see that there was actually an underlying structure to the whole design. Kind of like opening up a computer to see a whole labyrinth of wires and electronic chips, versus building one yourself and knowing *what* each of those wires and chips was doing.

"How does that even work?" he asked, fascinated. "I mean, it's paper."

Professor Lan twitched and Wen Yuan blanched, mind suddenly catching up with his mouth. Oh no, he'd screwed up – lingfu were supposed to be a *secret* art, and here he was just poking his nose in!

But Wei Wuxian just laughed, apparently unoffended, and reached over to snag a fresh piece of paper. A few quick folds, and he'd separated one third for a new lingfu. Then he picked up his brush and quickly wrote a character on the leftover paper. "First is this."

Wen Yuan blinked, squinting. That wasn't just the older style of characters Wei Wuxian used, that was *seal script*, and he wasn't so good at… oh. "Protection?"

Wei Wuxian nodded, tapping the character with the handle of his brush. "This is…" He hesitated, glancing at Lan Wangji. "First? Over?" A quick flicker of the brush painted a pair of characters in the corner of the paper.

Lan Wangji considered them for a moment. "Primary," he suggested.

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, head cocked to the side as he considered the word before nodding. "Primary," he echoed. "It… says? makes? …the use. Watch!"

Picking up the lingfu-sized blank piece, he began to ink the character for protection, and Wen Yuan blinked. Without the jumble of other lines to distract his eyes, he could see how what he'd thought was a decorative border actually *was* the character for protection, the lines broadened and elongated to create a sort of frame for the lingfu.

"*Oh*. That makes sense," Wen Yuan said. Peering at the lingfu Wei Wuxian had been working on earlier, he tried to unscramble the layers of lines in his head. It took him a minute, while Wei Wuxian waited with an air of amused patience, but finally a familiar shape caught his eye. Grabbing his pencil, he wrote the character for *watching* on the sheet Wei Wuxian was using as a scratch pad.

The cultivator grinned broadly. "Good!" he said enthusiastically, and added it to the demonstration lingfu he'd started, filling in the interior of the border created by the character for protection. "This is… foot. No… ground?"

Huh. "The base?" Wen Yuan suggested, and hastily wrote the word out when Wei Wuxian looked at him curiously.

Wei Wuxian's face immediately brightened, and he quickly wrote out what looked like the same characters in their older form, turning to Lan Wangji for confirmation. When the

professor nodded, Wei Wuxian repeated the word in his own language – at which point Wen Yuan realized that Lan Wangji was taking notes, probably to add the new phrases to the lexicon they were building – and then turned back to Wen Yuan. “This is base… this is *the* base,” he corrected himself. “And so…” A circling motion with a finger, indicating the way that the character filled the space inside that framing primary character.

Wen Yuan blinked, suddenly seeing the messiness of the lingfu in a new light. He was used to thinking of written things as being, well, *visual*, stuff meant to be seen. But if they were actually made up of functional *layers*… then of course it was going to look like a mess when you tried to view all of it at once. Like looking at an html code without any line breaks or color coding. They were *three-dimensional*, even if the dimensions were squished onto a two-dimensional surface.

And he was willing to bet that which layer got added where and when was just as important as sequencing in computer code. And that didn’t even get into the implications of what symbols were used. Come to think of it, he remembered reading that historical lingfu often incorporated characters from the Devanagari script. Which meant that there were *two* writing systems involved!

Just… Wow. He knew lingfu had to be complicated, they’d hardly be a special secret art if they were *easy*, but…

“I bet you would love programming,” he muttered.

Wei Wuxian blinked, tilting his head to the side with a quizzical sound. Wen Yuan shook his head, smiling sheepishly. He had some ideas for how to introduce computers properly, rather than just the surface-level “weird widget these people use” that Wei Wuxian had already figured out. But it kind of depended on getting the whole *fifteen hundred years* thing out of the way first.

“But how does it *work*?” he asked, reaching over to trace the shape of the *protection* character with his finger – although he was careful not to actually touch the paper. Not that he thought Wei Wuxian was the sort of person who’d leave a magic spell armed and ready to trigger, so to speak. But he did want to show that he was *careful and responsible*, and that meant not doing potentially stupid things. Like poking the mysterious complicated magic thing without instructions. “It’s just ink and paper.”

Erm. He assumed that was ink, anyway. Although historically, he did know that cinnabar was used in a lot of important stuff because the bright red was considered auspicious.

Wei Wuxian tapped the handle of his brush against his cheek for a moment, obviously weighing his words carefully. “Qi is… like water,” he said at last. “It is moving. Wards are like…” He pursed his lips and looked at Lan Wangji as he quickly wrote a word.

“Irrigation,” Lan Wangji said after a moment, and Wen Yuan could tell he was intrigued. For that matter, so was Wen Yuan; of all the possible analogies he might have imagined for explaining a fantastical thing like qi, something as… well, *mundane* as irrigation would not have occurred to him.

Which was silly, really. He only got to think of irrigation as boring because he lived in a modern world with modern farming techniques and transportation technology. If one bad harvest could make the difference between feast and famine, then there wouldn't be anything *boring* about irrigation.

"Qi moves," Wei Wuxian continued, turning back to Wen Yuan. "I use small qi, pull some to new path." He tapped the paper. "Lingfu makes shape of path. It is started, it does not stop. To stop, I must do." He puffed his cheeks with a huff and smiled wryly, obviously frustrated by the clumsiness of his limited vocabulary.

Personally, Wen Yuan was impressed, more than anything else. Because even if the phrasing was clumsy, the explanation made *sense*. It sounded like wards were… well, even more like programs than he'd thought, with just a certain amount of activation energy needed to trigger them, at which point they used ambient energy to run on their own.

At least, it made sense as long as he managed to get his brain unstuck from the whole *qi exists!* thing. Which was tricky, because what was qi even supposed to…

Wait. Okay, he was being silly. Obviously Wei Wuxian didn't mind questions, so why not just *ask*? "So where does qi come from? What *is* qi?"

Wei Wuxian blinked at him, looking genuinely taken aback. "Qi… is," he said.

Wen Yuan chewed at his lip. Well, that didn't really help. Was he supposed to take that as a profound statement about the nature of reality, or just the limits of Wei Wuxian's grasp of modern language? Or maybe the question just didn't make sense to him, like asking what air was and where it came from. People tended to have bigger things to worry about.

But when Wei Wuxian saw his expression, he huffed, clearly amused, and then reached out to poke Wen Yuan on the tip of his nose. "Qi is here," he said briskly, and then waved a hand at Lan Wangji. "Qi is there." He rapped on the surface of the table in front of him with his knuckles, then waved vaguely in the direction of the garden. "It is here. It is there. Qi *is*. Sometimes strong. Sometimes not strong. Sometimes clean, sometimes…" He hesitated, making a sort of twisting motion with his hand, then shrugged. "Qi *is*."

Wen Yuan couldn't help a rueful smile. Okay, profound statement about the nature of reality it was. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lan Wangji jotting down notes on a pad; he was willing to bet that the professor would want to go back and compare Wei Wuxian's account to the various philosophies that talked about qi.

Wen Yuan didn't know his classical philosophers quite so well, but he did wonder what Wei Wuxian would think of the Force. Come to think of it, hadn't George Lucas based that on qigong philosophies?

He sighed wistfully. "I just wish I could do stuff like that," he said. When Wei Wuxian gave him a curious look, he imitated one of the seals he'd seen in xianxia shows. "Fwoosh!"

Okay, yes, he'd been fishing for a laugh with that – and got one, as Wei Wuxian threw back his head, cackling gleefully.

Still snickering, Wei Wuxian shook his head with a grin… and then tilted his head, studying Wen Yuan thoughtfully, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Wen Yuan narrowed his eyes, immediately wary. That was the look of someone who was *plotting*. "…Whaaat…?" he asked suspiciously.

Wei Wuxian *grinned* at him, sunny and *smug*, and ostentatiously turned back to the lingfu he'd been working on. He even started humming.

Wen Yuan had to be impressed. That was the most pointed nonverbal *I'm not gonna tell yoooou* taunt he'd seen in his life!

Sighing dramatically, just in case a good guilt trip would be enough to tempt out a more forthcoming answer, Wen Yuan flopped forward over the table, nearly disturbing the little stack of papers Wei Wuxian had accumulated over the evening. Some of them looked like notes, although it was hard to tell, since they were in that swirling, flowing cursive that was awesome to look at and *awful* to read.

Which might actually be the point, now that he thought about it. Given that Wei Wuxian was still trying to figure out what was going on… well, it would make sense that if he had to write things down, he wouldn't want to make it easy for someone to snoop. Not that they *would*, of course!… but still, taking precautions was just practical.

A glimpse of something that definitely wasn't writing caught his eye. Intrigued, Wen Yuan almost reached out before catching himself and looking sheepishly at Wei Wuxian. "Um, is it okay if I…?"

The cultivator grinned and waved a hand, still humming to himself – although the tune had shifted from taunting to something peaceful and lilting as he idly spun the brush between his fingers. Taking the gesture as permission, Wen Yuan snagged the sheet of paper out of the pile, tugging it over for a closer look.

He had to smile – it was an ink painting of the Cold Springs, with the mountain rising up behind dark trees, both reflected in the water. Although Wei Wuxian had definitely taken some creative liberties; the mountain was a little more symmetrical, and the stone benches had been left out, giving the whole scene a much rawer, *wilder* look. He'd even added a couple of bunnies half-hidden in the grasses at the edge of the spring, although Wen Yuan was very certain that there'd been no bunnies there that afternoon.

He couldn't help being impressed. He remembered trying ink painting in class. It was *really* different from sketching, and especially from painting with oil or acrylics. With oil paint, you could go back again and again for *weeks* if you had to, getting everything just right. An ink painting might be done in five minutes… but there were no take-backs and no corrections. When the ink hit the paper, it was there to stay. So he had some idea of what it took to get that soft curve of the huddled rabbits and the delicate lines of ripples breaking apart the shadowy reflections.

It really was a good painting. Would Wei Wuxian mind if he kept it? It would make a really nice wall hanging.

Intending to ask, Wen Yuan looked up, waiting for an appropriate pause in the humming, and blinked. Now that he actually *listened*…

"Wait. That's *High Mountains and Flowing Water*!" he blurted. The cadence was a little odd, and some of the notes and phrases weren't what he was used to, but it was still recognizably the famous guqin song.

Wei Wuxian blinked at his sudden enthusiasm, clearly caught off guard. After a moment of plainly trying to puzzle through the words, he looked over at Lan Wangji, clearly hoping for an explanation.

Rather than explaining, Lan Wangji set his notepad aside and stood up to walk over to his guqin in the corner of the room. Settling himself down behind it, he began to play.

Wei Wuxian's eyes lit up as the first strings sang – and then even more as the notes began building upon each other into a recognizable melody. Leaning forward, he listened intently for a few phrases.

Then, unexpectedly, he started to sing.

Wen Yuan stared for a minute, taken aback. He knew that lots of people had come up with lyrics to match the famous song. It just… never occurred to him that people in ancient times would have done the same thing. Even if in hindsight it was perfectly obvious that they would; as Lan Wangji often reminded him, the basic nature of *people* back then wasn't any different from people today, they just lived in very different circumstances…

Wait – phone, phone, where did I put…!

Casting about frantically, he spotted his phone on the table and lunged for it, almost dropping it in his hurry before he finally got the audio recording app up and running.

Wei Wuxian had clearly noticed his scrambling, but the man kept singing, voice bright and clear. Although it was obvious that there *were* differences between the version he knew and the one Lan Wangji was playing; several times, one stumbled when the other hit a note or phrase he hadn't expected. After a section where they hit three such mismatches in close succession, Wei Wuxian actually had to stop singing for a minute because he was laughing too hard. But they still managed to get through the *whole song* – despite fifteen centuries of changing musical traditions between them.

Once the song was done, Wen Yuan reached for his phone again, meaning to stop the recording. As he picked it up, however, Lan Wangji began playing again, starting a new song.

Wen Yuan hesitated, frowning. He wasn't sure – he was still learning the basics of playing the guqin, music history wasn't something he'd really dug into – but he *thought* that was a newer piece, from when the Tang Dynasty had gotten established enough for the trade roads to start bringing in new music from other places again. Mostly because he remembered something about that trill being something adapted to the guqin from Indian music…

Well Wuxian listened for a minute, lips pursed thoughtfully. When Lan Wangji glanced at him, however, he shook his head; he didn't recognize the melody. Lan Wangji nodded, moving to muffle the strings—

"No no no!" Wei Wuxian said quickly, waving his hands. "Do not stop!"

Lan Wangji hesitated for just a heartbeat at that, but then gave an infinitesimal nod and resumed.

Wei Wuxian continued to listen for a minute, expression intent as he idly twirled his black dizi between his fingers. Then he brought the mouthpiece up to his lips and began to play.

The accompaniment was relatively simple – which made sense, given that Wei Wuxian was improvising it on the fly for a song he'd never heard before, influenced by a musical tradition he'd probably never even encountered. And yet it *worked*. By the end of the song, he'd even gotten enough of a feel for it to start throwing in embellishments to dance around the ringing tones of the guqin.

This time, after the song ended, Wei Wuxian only paused for a second or two before starting in on a new piece, one Wen Yuan didn't recognize. And going by the slight furrow in Lan Wangji's brow, it was unfamiliar to him as well. After listening briefly, however, his hands began moving over the strings again, starting with a basic baseline and then slowly building in complexity from there.

They're jamming, Wen Yuan thought, grinning. *It's an ancient music* jam session*, how cool is that, no one's going to believe… Oops!*

Hastily, he fished his spare charger out of his bag and plugged his phone in – the last thing he wanted was for his battery to die on him *now*, of all times. Another spark of inspiration hit, and he grabbed a spare piece of paper and started jotting down timestamps and notes, leaving space for other additions later. This definitely belonged in the "add to records" file!

Although really, right now he would just about give his *soul* for a proper recording device, rather than his phone's built-in microphone. But for now, he'd take what he could get.

Especially given that when it was Lan Wangji's turn again, he started on another Tang-era piece – except that Wei Wuxian's face immediately brightened and he immediately joined in, which meant that particular song was *way* older than people had thought, even if the version he knew clearly wasn't *exactly* the same.

They continued trading back and forth for a good half-dozen songs, with Wen Yuan listening intently and scribbling notes as he went. He'd have to go back later to get the titles for the ones he didn't recognize. Which was most of them; he wasn't sure, but he thought that Lan Wangji was deliberately exploring folk songs dated to later periods, maybe trying to see if any of them were actually older than scholars thought. And the songs Wei Wuxian was playing were a whole bunch of different styles – maybe from different regions?

Wen Yuan had to bite back a laugh at that. *So basically they're both testing each other. It's a jam session* and *an ancient music version of a dance-off!*

There weren't a lot of shared ones, though. Which made sense, really; music, especially folk songs, was one of those things that didn't stay static, even when people *did* try to lock it in place with a written version. For that matter, he should check with Wei Wuxian about the titles of the pieces that Wen Yuan recognized; it was entirely possible that the tune had survived under multiple names.

Meanwhile, Lan Wangji had started another song. Wen Yuan didn't recognize this one, either, but he immediately made a mental note to find out where it had come from; there was a softness to the lilting tone that sank into the mind and settled there, peaceful but not sleepy – almost like settling into meditation *just right—*

Wei Wuxian stiffened.

Wen Yuan blinked. Wei Wuxian was staring at Lan Wangji with a startled sort of intensity that *felt* very different from the look of concentration he'd had when trying to figure out an unfamiliar song. Then he lifted his dizi and…

Oh. That was why. He wasn't just familiar with this one, he *knew* it.

There were none of the hesitations or slight mismatches from the other pieces. The dizi's countermelody danced around the guqin, playful where the guqin was steady, soft where the strings were strong, sometimes settling into a perfect harmony for a few measures before dancing away again, even picking up the main melody in places. It wasn't just an accompaniment, it was a *duet*.

Wen Yuan let out a breath as the song came to an end. "That was *amazing*," he said with feeling. "What was it? Why haven't I heard it before?"

Lan Wangji didn't smile, but Wen Yuan could tell that he was amused by the outpouring of enthusiasm. "It is an untitled piece I discovered in the archives," he said.

The *archives*. Meaning it had just been… *forgotten* over the centuries?

"How did people just *lose* a song like that?!" Wen Yuan demanded… or rather, intended to. Except that, when he opened his mouth, he was suddenly ambushed by a jaw-cracking yawn.

What? No! I can't be sleepy already!

But Lan Wangji looked at the clock, which showed it was already nine thirty, and set his guqin aside. "Enough."

"But…" Wen Yuan said, trying not to whine. Lan Wangji took sleep schedules seriously, yes, but… he wasn't *ready* for the day to be over.

Lan Wangji was unmoved. "There will be time tomorrow."

Wen Yuan huffed, cheeks puffing out – which was *not* a pout and he was *not* channeling Jin Ling in a sulk! – and sent a beseeching look Wei Wuxian's direction.

He blinked. He'd expected Wei Wuxian to be laughing at him, to be honest. Instead, he found the man's mobile face had gone utterly *still*, grey eyes unreadable as he watched Lan Wangji covering his guqin.

Only he must have noticed Wen Yuan's attention, because a moment later he laughed, wagging a chiding finger at Wen Yuan with a smirk. "Sleeping time is sleeping time, little student," he mock-scolded, gathering up his papers from the table.

Including the ink painting of the cold springs, Wen Yuan noted with disappointment as he started clearing away his textbooks – they'd decided that he would sleep in the public room for the time being, which meant rearranging things for space.

Maybe he could ask about the painting tomorrow. He would need to follow up about the titles of the songs they'd just done, anyway. Especially that last one! The idea that it had just been moldering away forgotten in some historic archive was just… just *wrong*, darn it.

But he had to admit – especially when he found himself yawning all over again – that Lan Wangji was right. It really had been a long – wild! – day. Even if he tried to keep going, he'd just end up making stupid mistakes. There wasn't any rush. Questions could wait for tomorrow.

That was Forget Envies.

Wei Wuxian strolled down the stone-pathed path, humming to himself as he enjoyed the cool breeze filtering through the trees. The moon beyond the trees was getting close to full, and that meant there was more than enough light trickling through the leaves to light his way; he'd always had excellent night vision, anyway..

And he'd spent the last few days since moving into Lan Wangji's home… well, to be honest, he'd mostly been meditating and training, trying to sort out the strange *ache* in his core. But he'd also explored quite a bit. Although he'd mostly prioritized the maze of buildings, for several reasons. First, simply to familiarize himself with the paths and the blind spots, so that he could get around unnoticed. But also… well. There weren't generally a *lot* of people out, but there were usually enough for him to spend some time eavesdropping. Not that he actually understood much of what they said, but it gave him a sense of the *rhythm* of the language.

He'd stayed within the compound itself, however. Lan Wangji had asked him to, after all. And more to the point… if his guess about the glow against low-hanging clouds was correct, there was a city nearby, perhaps at the base of the mountain, and he'd really rather spend a little more time learning how to blend in before he tried exploring *that*.

But he hadn't explored the wooded area immediately surrounding Lan Wangji's home. Not before today.

The path was threaded with moonlight. Easy enough to find his way, even while his mind was racing.

He'd spent a lot of time with Lan Yi during the war. The woman who'd led her sect back to power and prominence with steadfast resolve, unwavering focus and a few strategically placed Chord Assassinations was not the sort to be discomfited by some not entirely conventional cultivation techniques. Despite the difference in their ages, they'd gotten along well enough. Like him, she was interested in the theory and philosophy of cultivation, in trying new things rather than sticking rigorously to the tried and traditional. And it had been a relief to spend time talking to someone who was interested in the *how* and *what* and *why* of his new techniques, rather than praising him to his face (or whining about him not doing more, despite him explaining *yet again* that no, he couldn't just wave a hand and raise the Wen dead to fight *their own people*, it didn't work that way; even odds which way the conversations would go, really) and then sneering about *heresy* and *demonic* behind his back.

Lan Yi had huffed at that. "Excellence will always draw the envy of the petty," she'd said with a serenity that did absolutely nothing to hide the razor edge in her words. "Very well then, let us be heretical together."

He hadn't taken her up on it too often; Jiang Cheng had been *touchy* about Wei Wuxian spending too much time away from the Jiang camp, and the last thing he'd wanted was to give the swamp of inveterate gossips that was the cultivation world any ammunition to use against Lan Yi.

But he'd spent more than enough time with her to recognize the song she'd composed for her deceased husband. Given he'd been there *as she composed it*.

It was a good song. Even after the war, he'd catch himself humming snatches of it every now and then, in rare moments of peace, or when he'd needed to calm someone.

And it was a song that no one else in the world should know about.

"I did not compose this for the world," she'd told him, when he'd wondered aloud why she never performed the song publicly, not even for members of her own sect, cool and calm the way only dangerously deep waters could be. "Let my descendants discover it, generations after I am gone. In my life, it will belong to me and my husband alone."

War had finally done what fifty years and sect leadership – and three children! – had failed to do, carving fine lines of time at the corners of mouth and eyes. Lines that crinkled into a very un-Lan-like smirk as she raised an eyebrow at him. "Although apparently you as well."

He'd laughed, spinning Chenqing in his hand. That had been the first time he'd played the accompaniment he'd composed for the piece, and he was pleased it had gone over well. "Careful there," he warned her lightly, batting his eyes playfully. "Jiang Cheng will accuse you of trying to steal me again!"

Lan Yi had given him an arch look that was suspiciously knowing, and turned back to her guqin without a word. And the conversation had drifted away to other, less fraught topics from there.

Only now, as he walked out into the open moonlight surrounding the springs, her words were echoing in his head.

Let my descendants discover it, generations after I am gone.

And his host was *Lan* Wangji.

He hadn't survived the Sunshot Campaign by believing in coincidences. Especially given…

Still humming to himself, he began walking around the edge of the pool, retracing the same route he'd taken earlier.

Under moonlight, the resemblance was even more striking. Oh, the path itself had changed from the one he'd once followed on a dare, and there had been no benches, before. After all, you were supposed to meditate *in* the Cold Springs, that was the whole point! But the springs themselves, the dark stone bulk of the cliff, even the moss-clothed stones standing up out of the water singly and in clusters here and there…

Well. They hadn't changed a bit.

The forest, now… the forest had *definitely* changed. But then, it would have, wouldn't it? He'd never had a chance to come back during the war, and the situation after hadn't really been conducive to casually dropping by other sects for a visit… but Cloud Recesses had *burned*. Of course it would grow back changed.

Except.

He'd visited places where forest fires had raged, on night hunts; guai and yao were prone to manifesting in the wreckage left behind by so many lives and cycles suddenly and violently destroyed. Between that and the war… well. He knew from experience how soot and char could linger, years and even decades after the last hint of smoke was gone.

And these woods were not young.

His leisurely stroll had brought him around to the far side of the spring. Deliberately, he turned, looking across the water and out over the trees to the mountain gleaming silver against the night sky.

And then down to the painting in his hand.

Ignore the benches, ignore minor details in the placement of the trees, and the match was *almost* perfect.

Except that the mountain looming over him now was missing a piece. A piece that matched the scar on its side, mark of a long-ago rockslide that had shattered part of the peak and smashed its way down the mountainside.

So long ago that the forest had grown back *over* the scar.

Deliberately, Wei Wuxian set the painting aside on a nearby bench, setting a rock on it to hold it in place in case the wind picked up. Then he set his hands on his hips and huffed.

Let my descendants discover it, generations after I am gone.

It should have been ridiculous. Yes, he'd spent three years in the Burial Mounds; it wasn't *that* long to spend in secluded cultivation, not at his level. But while he wouldn't put it past the warped ancient battlefield to pull some kind of time shenanigans, he'd visited the town of Yiling fairly regularly, for supplies and to check in with everyone. He was pretty sure he would have noticed years passing like days.

And yet. The last thing he remembered was preparing to leave…

And then waking up *out of ice*. With an arrow-scar in his chest that he had only a flash of sense-memory associated with, and a core that *still* felt strangely bruised. *Strained*. Despite having over a ten-day of nothing better to do but sit around meditating.

Not to mention, surrounded by people speaking a strange language that sometimes verged on *too* familiar. Who apparently knew next to nothing of cultivation, and had never heard of any of the great sects, so far as he could tell… but who had the *names*.

How long has it been?

He allowed himself a deep breath, and then vigorously shook his shoulders out, eyeing the pool in front of him. One last test, then.

The layout hadn't changed very much. He found the rock exactly where he'd expected it. Although now the stone was covered with layer upon layer of thick mosses, thick enough he could *feel* the age of it, where countless roots had nibbled away at stone.

Nibbled, but not destroyed. And under those roots…

Well then. That was that.

Climbing back out of the water, he took a moment to wring out his clothes, and then sat cross-legged on a bench – not the one where he'd left his painting, he'd worked hard on that, he didn't want to drip on it! – and rested his chin in his palm, studying the water.

All right then. He'd reached the end of his patience.

Time to see about getting some answers.

Wei Wuxian was waiting for him when Lan Wangji stepped out into the garden for his morning workout.

That alone told him that something was amiss. Over the past week, they'd gotten to know the rhythms of each other's routine. Wei Wuxian preferred the evening hours, never rising until the sun was high enough in the sky to reach over the trees and directly into the garden.

And yet here he was in the grey pre-dawn light, mobile face set and *still* in a way that Lan Wangji had only seen once before. After Jin Zixun had attempted to steal his belongings and shattered the implied safety of the lab.

Lan Wangji stiffened, workout forgotten. “Wei Wuxian. What has happened?”

Wei Wuxian’s focus never wavered – not even at the sight of Lan Wangji’s workout clothes, when Lan Wangji would have expected at least a raised eyebrow or teasing grin, given that they had to be positively *indecent* by the standards Wei Wuxian knew.

The cultivator uncrossed his arms to crook a finger and nodded towards the path leading away from the Jingshi. “Come,” he said.

“…A moment.” Stepping back into his room, Lan Wangji quickly grabbed a light cardigan; the mountain morning air was slightly too chilled to be going about in exercise clothes when one was not actively exercising.

When he stepped out again, Wei Wuxian simply nodded and began walking.

The man’s uncharacteristic silence made the walk through the woods seem to stretch eerily long – not helped by the relaxed, deceptively nonchalant pace that was downright dissonant against the strange tension in the air between them. It felt like an eternity before Wei Wuxian turned, leading Lan Wangji onto the path towards the Cold Springs.

Why the Cold Springs? He hadn’t acted as if anything was amiss when they’d visited yesterday.

Wei Wuxian went to one of the side pools, partially hidden from the rest of the springs by a stony outcrop protruding from the cliff. Then, without so much as a pause, he waded into the water.

Lan Wangji must have made some sound at that; the cultivator looked over his shoulder and suddenly grinned mischievously, beckoning with his hand.

Lan Wangji gave him a flat stare, trying not to betray how relieved he felt at the return of the man’s normal demeanor. Finding a nearby bench, he sat down and began to pull his shoes off. Setting them underneath the bench, he discovered that Wei Wuxian’s boots were already there. He hadn’t even noticed that the man was barefoot, distracted by his strange mood.

He started to roll his pants up as well, but a second glance at the water, already over Wei Wuxian’s knees despite the fact that he’d only gone a few steps away from the edge, changed his mind. Especially given that Wei Wuxian was standing with arms crossed and lips pursed, obviously impatient to get to… whatever it was that he had brought Lan Wangji here to see.

So, abandoning the effort as pointless, Lan Wangji stood up and walked to the edge of the pool.

The water was so cold it *burned*. Gritting his teeth, Lan Wangji made himself lower his foot all the way to the bottom, then stepped his other foot in – and then had to stop and breathe for a minute, counting off each breath as he waited for his body to adjust. Then, careful of the numbness of his feet, he waded out to join Wei Wuxian.

He found the man watching him with a look of thoughtful interest – which was at least familiar, and vastly preferable to the hard *blankness* of when they'd first arrived. As was the quirk of a smirk as the man shook his head when Lan Wangji slanted an eyebrow at him in silent inquiry, before turning and moving deeper into the pool.

Bracing himself, Lan Wangji followed.

Wei Wuxian led him to a cluster of stones rising up out of the water in a deeper part of the pool. By the time they reached the stones, the water was almost to the bottom of Lan Wangji's rib cage. Which was *intensely* uncomfortable, and he was grimly holding back uneasy thoughts about hypothermia. His feet were already numb from the cold, and he could only be grateful that the bottom of the pool was smooth and even; he was not at all certain he would even feel any obstruction before he tripped on it.

Wei Wuxian didn't seem troubled by the cold at all, as he turned and tilted his head towards the rocks. "Look."

Frowning, Lan Wangji shifted to look more closely at the rocks. After a moment he spotted it; on the side of one of the rocks, the thick layers of moss had been peeled back from the stone slightly. He opened his mouth, about to chide the man for the disruption – the mosses here were slow-growing and long-lived – and then paused.

Underneath the uprooted section of moss, he could make out the edges of something carved into the stone.

Hesitating for a moment, he reached out, flexing his fingers to coax some dexterity back into them, and gingerly pulled the moss back to uncover the rest of the carving.

It wasn't much; just two characters. The lines were somewhat uneven, as if done by someone unfamiliar with carving stone, and centuries of weathering and roots had worn the edges away until the whole carving was more a series of indentations than clearly defined lines. Still, they were legible… and one was quite familiar.

"Wei… Ying?" Lan Wangji read aloud, glancing at Wei Wuxian for confirmation of his pronunciation of the second character.

Wei Wuxian tapped his chest with a single finger. "Me," he said.

Oh. Of course; that made sense. He hadn't considered it, not with so many other things happening, but in Wei Wuxian's time, people had used courtesy names, to mark the transition from child to adult. So *Wuxian* had to be his courtesy name, while *Ying* was the name he'd had as a child…

As a child. When, presumably, he'd carved it into this stone. *Fifteen hundred years ago*.

Lan Wangji looked at the moss again. At those weathered lines, worn down by the passing of centuries.

When he looked up again, he found Wei Wuxian watching him steadily, face expressionless once again. Except for his eyes, which were… not accusatory, perhaps, so much as inescapably *knowing*.

"How long?" he asked quietly.

Lan Wangji drew in a deep breath, lungs tight in a way that had nothing to do with the icy water he was standing in. He wasn't ready for this conversation. Now that it had come to him, he felt less ready than ever.

But he'd already lied by omission for far too long. Now Wei Wuxian had found the rotted ax handle on his own, and there could be no more stalling.

He released the breath in a long, slow exhale. "Come with me."

The first order of business, when they arrived back at the Jingshi, was to change into dry clothes and warm up. Lan Wangji put the wet clothes into the washer, grateful that at least Wei Wuxian had been wearing some of Lan Wangji's spares rather than his own ancient silks; he could just imagine how Professor Yao would react to "priceless artifacts" being treated in such a way.

Wen Yuan was still sleeping in the main room, so Lan Wangji led Wei Wuxian into his office, where he busied himself making tea for both of them; he kept an electric kettle and the necessary accoutrements on a side table for the times when he was deep in writing or research and disinclined to go to the kitchen.

As he worked, Wei Wuxian looked around with interest; apparently his nocturnal wanderings hadn't included the study, perhaps out of a sense of courtesy given the locked door, perhaps simply because he'd made the tactical choice to familiarize himself with the wider surroundings first. His eyes lit up when he spotted Lan Wangji's reference library, three floor-to-ceiling shelves laden with books, and he immediately went over to look at the contents with shameless interest.

Lan Wangji couldn't help watching out of the corner of his eye. He'd given Wei Wuxian his own blue silk sleeping clothes to change into; they were not entirely dissimilar from Wei Wuxian's original underrobes, and the cut was loose enough to accommodate the differences in body shape.

He just hadn't anticipated how… *intimate* it would look. The collar in particular was much wider and looser than anything Wei Wuxian had worn before, and Lan Wangji kept finding his eyes slipping down to the sharp line of the man's collarbones. And it did *not help* that Wei Wuxian had left his hair loose to dry, and kept absently twirling a bit of it between his fingers as he surveyed the shelves. It made Lan Wangji's fingers itch as he wondered what it would feel like if…

And that was an *entirely* inappropriate thought, even outside the context of the conversation they were about to have. Mastering his wandering thoughts, Lan Wangji shoved them into a

mental box and locked it, before carefully schooling his face to disciplined stillness. Picking up several sheets of paper, he called Wei Wuxian over to the desk.

The man immediately joined him – so perhaps he had not been so deeply absorbed in the shelves as he had appeared. He watched with interest as Lan Wangji laid three sheets of paper out on his desk end to end, taping them together to keep them in place. Fortunately his desk was quite large – a necessity for a scholar who might have four different references open at any one time – so he had the space he needed.

Then he braced himself, and picked up his pen.

He'd spent the soaked, shivering walk back to the Jingshi wracking his mind, going through all the different approaches that he had contemplated for when the time came to explain the full extent of Wei Wuxian's changed circumstances. This was what he had settled on. Originally he had rejected it as far too distant and impersonal a way to break such devastating news…

But now the news had already broken. What remained was to explain the *extent* of it in a way that would be clear and easy to wrap one's mind around.

Not a simple task. Humans were not really wired to think in terms of centuries, let alone millennia.

So…

He began at one end with the Battle of Red Cliffs. He had yet to determine any solid dates for Wei Wuxian himself – not least because attempting such a conversation would have led inexorably to the one they were currently having. But the Battle of Red Cliffs was a specific event of known date, and more importantly one that Wei Wuxian would also know. It would serve as an anchor for the timeline he was about to build.

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows rose when Lan Wangji added the Sui Dynasty to the line, and even more when he noted the time lapsed – three hundred seventy years after the battle that had spelled the final end of the Han and the fragmentation of a once unified empire.

At first, Wei Wuxian seemed more intrigued than troubled, even when Lan Wangji added the start of the Tang, roughly thirty years after the Sui.

Then Lan Wangji marked the Song, three hundred years after the Tang, and Wei Wuxian's mouth tightened to a thin, grim line.

Lan Wangji could understand. The moss alone would have made it clear that quite some time had passed. But to know the time was measured not in decades but in *centuries*…

Lan Wangji didn't look at the man's face after that, keeping his eyes on the paper as he added more and more points to the timeline: the Yuan, the Ming, the Qing, and finally the Republic, followed by the People's Republic of China. Each transition adding more and more to the centuries.

Finally, he added one last set of years – seventy years from the founding of the People's Republic – and capped off the timeline with a vertical bar. He tapped it with the back of the pen twice, briskly: *this is now*.

Then he made himself look up.

Wei Wuxian was studying the timeline silently, clearly adding up the dynasties and centuries. His face was still and calm – but for the wide grey eyes, and the paleness of his face. Finally, however, he raised his gaze to meet Lan Wangji's.

In that moment, he looked horrifying, wrenchingly, ironically *young*. A stark reminder that outside the ice, he was only in his early twenties.

"One thousand five hundred years," he said quietly. It was neither a question nor a statement.

Lan Wangji nodded anyway, and braced himself. Because it was one thing to know that years had passed. But facing the vast, stark *extent* of it – surely there would be grief, fury, *disbelief*, and he did not blame the man in the least…

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes for a moment, exhaling heavily. Reaching into the loose collar of his borrowed shirt, he pulled out a sheet of paper and placed it on Lan Wangji's desk.

Lan Wangji felt his eyes widen. He'd spent many hours at the Cold Springs, as a student and after moving into the Jingshi. He recognized that scene. But the absence of the benches, the mountain in the background standing tall and *whole*…

This was the Cold Springs as Wei Wuxian must have known them, fifteen hundred years ago.

The mountains themselves had changed. No wonder there was no disbelief. On some level, Wei Wuxian had already known. The exact number was simply… confirmation.

Wei Wuxian stepped back from the table. "I need…" he started, and then frowned, gesturing to the door and the garden beyond it, just starting to pick up the glow of the morning sun. "Thinking time," he approximated, after a moment of obvious sifting through his available vocabulary.

Lan Wangji nodded. That was to be expected. "Take the time you need. I will be here."

The man nodded, before turning and walking briskly out the door.

Lan Wangji exhaled slowly, and then deliberately lowered himself down onto his desk chair as the tension of the morning… not so much broke as *crashed down*.

He didn't know if that had gone well or poorly… but it was done.

Now what?

NOTES:

“Find the rotted ax handle” – a reference to a Chinese folk tale on the lines of Urashimataro, spending too long in the fairy world, or Rip Van Winkle: a woodcutter encounters some immortals on a mountain, eats their food, and notices that his ax handle has rotted away. He goes home to discover that hundreds of years have passed. One of those stories that every culture has some version of!

Safety note: please do not go wading in deep icy cold water. Hypothermia hits *fast*. I cheated a bit in this chapter for Drama, but it’s canon that the Cold Springs are *very cold*. Good for superhuman cultivators. Not so good for the rest of us!

I’ve read tons of AUs that recreate the romantic element of Wangxian. But writing this, given the changed context… I decided it would be fun to incorporate Wangxian’s role as a *plot device*, the seemingly unimportant song that actually gives away a major piece of information. With a touch of role reversal thrown in for good measure!

(Although it does require a bit of handwaving – China didn’t develop a notation system detailed enough to allow someone to accurately recreate a completely unfamiliar piece of music until well after the sixth century!)

High Mountains and Flowing Water is one of the most famous folk songs of China. And, fun aside, the story of its composition, and the friendship between the composer, guqin master Bo Ya, and Zhong Ziqi, a woodsman, is practically the ur-example of the concept of *zhiji* or *zhiyin*. Given how CQL has embedded those terms into the MDZS fandom, I just had to throw the reference in… although, ironically, in the novel, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are practically a *deconstruction* of the concept of zhiji. Which I suspect is intentional on the part of the author. Communication is hard, and love is something that takes active effort – romantic, platonic, or otherwise.

As for Lan Yi… for the record, I understand that CQL lifted that character and gave her a much more active role than “minor worldbuilding detail for color”; this has nothing to do with that. I just needed a Lan character to be part of the backstory, and she’s one of the only names available! Bunnies see Wei Wuxian’s relationship with her as similar to his canon one with Wen Qing, with a slight twist in that she’s old enough to be his mother. She’s the *female* sect leader of the Lan and the creator of Chord Assassination. I don’t think guidao would give her much pause! (Also significant is that she’s the only other character aside from Wei Wuxian and Wen Qing that we know of in canon who *created* a technique. Suggesting she’d likely share the innovative mentality that sets Wei Wuxian apart.) So since I had to tweak who Wei Wuxian’s contemporaries in the Lan would be for this fic… I decided to run with it! Team Give Wei Wuxian A Terrifying Auntie Who Encourages Him!

And yes, Jiang Cheng was very right to be worried; Lan Yi had a cutthroat streak and was *absolutely* plotting to steal the young genius for her own sect.

Shell game: referencing the carnival game of hiding a token under one of three cups (or traditionally shells, hence the name), moving the cups around, then having someone guess which one the token is under. It seemed a more Lan Wangji sort of reference than “sorry, your princess is not in this castle”! (Even if Wei Wuxian would find the latter hilarious.)

Li Bai was a Chinese poet who lived in the early to mid 700s. He's considered one of the most important poets in Chinese literature, rivaled pretty much only by his friend Du Fu. Li Bai in particular was known for styling himself as an adventurer and writing poetry about celebrating the pleasures of friendship, the depth of nature, solitude, and the joys of drinking wine… so yes, I imagine Wei Wuxian would enjoy his work!

(Fun aside, the poetry book is also a vestigial remnant of that original plotbunny featuring Lan Wangji using his knowledge of classic poetry traditions to communicate. The problem was that writing that would require *me* to learn said traditions… and I was writing this right in the middle of the final push to finish my dissertation. That was not gonna happen. Doesn't help that I plain cannot wrap my brain around poetry…)

The water-walking is actually taken from a scene in the SVSSS donghua; there's no mention of it in MDZS… but then again, there's no scene in MDZS where it would have come up (and the novel doesn't bother much with "cultivation coolness" scenes anyway), so it *might* be a thing… and if it were, it seems like it would be a Yunmeng thing. So I included it for fun… and yes, Wei Wuxian is *absolutely* showing off.

Fun little language detail: according to some studies, during a conversation it's fairly normal to only actually *hear* 50-70% of what someone actually says. Everything else is lost in mumbling, momentary distraction, focus on our own response, etc. We just don't notice, for the same reason that we don't actually *hear* what our native language sounds like unless we resort to tricks like repeating a word or phrase until it loses meaning: the language comprehension part of the brain overwrites what we actually heard through our ears with what we probably should have heard (plus context, body language, and lip reading). So yes, there is much more to conversation than vocabulary and grammar!

For the curious: a vocabulary of roughly five hundred words is "beginner." For fluency, you need about two thousand plus.

And I am absolutely cheating with how fast Wei Wuxian is learning. My justification is that Wei Wuxian is just that quick learning new things, and Authorial Convenience. And Cultivation (which I will get into later).

Speaking of, a side note: since I'm writing in English, I'm trying to lean on things that make *English* tricky for new learners, like definite and indefinite articles (or articles at all!). Which are not *Chinese* language errors, but, well. Translation Convention!

Necessary caveat, I know nothing about talismans/lingfu; the explanation here is created from just what I picked up from reading the entry on lingfu in Wikipedia and my knowledge of the writing system. Which I admit is a little ironic, given how hard I cringe when someone decides to depict Wei Wuxian's skill with talismans by talking about modifying radicals. (I just… *no*. That is not how the writing system works. That's the same as writing brake instead of break, they're instead of their, or knight instead of night. If you change the radical, *you are writing a completely different and unrelated word*!)

Chapter 8: Morning

Chapter Summary

Everyone needs some time to react.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Not many people could tell when Professor Lan was brooding – including Wen Yuan half the time, if he was going to be honest. But when he poked his nose into the professor's office to let him know that Wen Yuan was up and the main room was open again (and to ask about using the shower – they should probably work out a rotation for that, or *someone* was going to end up getting an embarrassing eyeful eventually, and it would probably be him) and found Lan Wangji just… sitting there, instead of working? Well, even *Jin Ling* would have noticed something was wrong.

Actually, that wasn't really fair. For all his efforts to imitate an emotional porcupine, Jin Ling could be amazingly sensitive. He just hated admitting to it.

Wen Yuan hesitated in the doorway, noting the papers spread out over the desk and a second cup of tea, half-full still and, going by the lack of steam, already gone cold.

His stomach flipped uneasily. "Did… something happen?"

Lan Wangji looked at him. "…I once wondered if Wei Wuxian had been to these mountains in his own time," he said after a moment. "I should have considered that thought more carefully."

Wen Yuan sighed in relief. For a minute there, he'd been sure that something had gone down with the break-ins that Nie Mingjue had been investigating or something; he couldn't think of any other reason for someone to visit the Jingshi at this hour…

Then the implications sank in, and he stiffened, looking at the papers on the desk again. One was the painting he'd been admiring the night before, but the others…

Oh.

Looking up from the timeline, he swallowed. "So… he knows now?"

Lan Wangji nodded gravely.

Ow. Okay, no wonder the professor had been brooding. Wen Yuan knew he'd been worrying over the best way to break that particular news. Given that this obviously hadn't been

planned… “How did it go?” he asked quietly.

Uncharacteristically, Lan Wangji hesitated. “He… said he needed time to think.”

Well, *yeah*. No kidding. That was one heck of a thing to wrap your mind around. “I’ll go check on him,” Wen Yuan said.

Lan Wangji looked at him. “He may not welcome company,” he warned.

Wen Yuan nodded. “I understand that. And if he doesn’t want me there, I’ll leave,” he promised. “I just… want to make sure that he knows he’s not *alone*, you know? That we’re here, too.”

Lan Wangji considered his words for a moment, then inclined his head slightly. Permission obtained, Wen Yuan slipped back out of the office and started searching.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t in the guest room, which wasn’t really a surprise. It was a nice room, but it was *borrowed*, not really his own. Not to mention, Wei Wuxian didn’t strike him as the sort of person to retreat indoors when he wanted to think – especially after the man had been locked in a lab for a week!

But when he looked around the garden, he didn’t see Wei Wuxian anywhere – not even when he followed the little footpaths that led to the quiet nooks partially sheltered from the main house by the greenery, which he knew Lan Wangji liked to use for meditating sometimes. He even checked the rocks out in the pond, because… well, if you didn’t want to be disturbed and had the ability to walk on *water*…

No luck.

Wen Yuan hesitated, trying to consider the options. He didn’t *think* Wei Wuxian would have gone out wandering in broad daylight; he’d taken their security concerns pretty seriously so far. Although he might be second-guessing that now. Which could get very messy.

Maybe he’d just gone to the Cold Springs? They were a good place to sit and think…

Just in case… “Wei Wuxian?” he called, a little tentatively. Because if the man *was* here and had just hidden himself *really* well, well, that was probably a hint that company really *wouldn’t* be welcome, but…

“A’Yuan?”

He jumped, looking around wildly… then, as his ears caught up with his brain, he looked *up*.

Wei Wuxian waved at him from the roof of the Jingshi.

On the rooftop. That was *so* like something straight out of a xianxia show that Wen Yuan found himself looking for cameras and wires. If it weren’t for the fact that he *knew* Wei Wuxian hadn’t seen any xianxia shows, he’d think the man was riffing off them on purpose!

…Oh man. Now he was seriously looking forward to introducing Wei Wuxian to xianxia. He'd probably find the whole genre *hilarious*.

Although, as far as hanging out on rooftops went… Wen Yuan did have to admit that, if you had to sit down and process bad news, there were definitely worse places for it than a sunny rooftop looking out over a pretty garden.

Of course, it also presented a bit of a problem…

Wen Yuan hesitated, eyeing the railing on the veranda and the distance between it and the eaves, and wrestled with himself for a minute before he gave in and admitted that yes, he really was going to try it. It probably wasn't even the stupidest thing he'd ever done!

Then again, he'd jumped in front of a bunch of panicking security officers holding guns. The "stupid" bar was kind of embarrassingly high at this point.

Getting onto the railing was definitely tricky, and he was very grateful that he'd always had a good sense of balance. Luckily, once he managed to straighten up, the eave was close enough that he could reach out and up and grab the edge.

Now for the hard part. *I got this!*

He jumped.

"*Hyuuurrrrrrrraaaaaauuuuugh…!*"

Uh-oh. He'd managed to get his chin up over the eave into a full pull-up, but his arms were refusing to extend *up* any higher and he hadn't considered that the eave being far enough out over the veranda to grab meant it was *also* too far out from the wall for him to kick off it and there wasn't anything he could actually properly *grip* on the flat roof tiles which meant he didn't really have a solid hold and okay, maybe he *didn't* got this…

Wei Wuxian laughed, and then strong hands gripped Wen Yuan under the arms, providing just enough lift to let him lever himself up and get a leg over the edge. At which point Wen Yuan didn't so much *climb* up as *flop*, pitching forward to land face-down on the tiles.

"Owww," he observed. Seriously, how did Professor Lan make stuff like that look so *easy*? No wonder Lan Jingyi complained about false advertising!

Wei Wuxian laughed again at his groaning, ruffling his hair, and Wen Yuan mentally shook himself, because *right* – there was a reason he'd put himself through that.

Catching his breath again, Wen Yuan levered himself up onto his hands and knees and clambered up the slope of the roof and away from the edge until he could sit down next to Wei Wuxian.

"So… are you okay?" he asked tentatively. And then flushed, because… augh, what a *stupid* question to start with!

Wei Wuxian blinked at him, and then Wen Yuan felt silly for a different reason – because of course he wouldn't know slangy terms like *okay* yet, Lan Wangji didn't talk that way.

But his tone must have conveyed… well, *enough* of what he meant, because after a moment, the man chuckled, and if it was rueful… well. Yeah. "It…" He pursed his lips, then shrugged. "Explains much things."

Which… yeah. It would, wouldn't it? There were probably a million little things – and not so little ones! – that just… hadn't made any sense, all this time, because Wei Wuxian had no way of knowing what expectations wouldn't even *apply* anymore, because he had no frame of reference for how much things *could* have changed.

Still… Wen Yuan slanted a look at the man again. When he'd first seen Wei Wuxian on the rooftop, he'd been sitting in the lotus position – he'd probably been meditating. But he hadn't bothered going back to it after helping Wen Yuan climb up; now he was just sitting, arms wrapped loosely around his knees as he looked out over the garden and the trees beyond it.

He didn't actually look all that upset, just thoughtful, which… in a strange way, that made Wen Yuan feel even worse about the whole mess. Because Wei Wuxian was pretty resilient, sure – he'd held up through a *lot* of stuff already, when Wen Yuan was pretty sure *he* would have flipped out multiple times over. But it wasn't about resilience; it was that Wei Wuxian *deserved* the chance to just… get upset, because something awful had happened to him and it wasn't fair!

Although he was pretty sure Wei Wuxian would just laugh about the fair part, because, well, the world didn't care about fair. But that didn't make the not-fair parts suck any less!

"Do you want a hug?" Wen Yuan blurted.

And then flushed, feeling like a fool, when Wei Wuxian blinked at him. Of course he wouldn't know the word for *hug*, it would never have come up; Lan Wangji was way more approachable than a lot of people assumed at first glance, but he wasn't a really *tactile* person either. For that matter, Wen Yuan wasn't sure that Middle Chinese *had* a word for hugging, or at least not one that didn't carry about twelve different layers of fraught societal expectations.

But people were people, and under all the weird twists cultures could cook up, some instincts stayed the same. So… Feeling incredibly foolish, but determined to see his offer through, Wen Yuan opened his arms in invitation.

Wei Wuxian looked startled for a moment. Then he chuckled and leaned over, wrapping an arm around Wen Yuan's shoulders.

They ended up more sort of leaning against each other than hug-hugging, but that was fine. It was warm and comfortable and companionable, which meant it served its purpose.

Wei Wuxian didn't seem to feel like talking, which was understandable. He was still learning the language, after all, and this was… well, a *lot*. But he seemed to enjoy the company, so… Wen Yuan figured he'd gotten that part right, at least.

Of course, they couldn't stay up there forever. Actually, Wen Yuan was pretty sure it had been less than an hour before his stomach very noisily reminded him that he hadn't had breakfast yet.

Wei Wuxian snickered at his disgruntled expression, wagging a teasingly chiding finger at him before standing up and stretching lazily. Wen Yuan made a face at the man and did *not* get up; he'd already lost any pretense of dignity anyway, so he just scootched down the roof tiles on his butt until his feet were dangling over the eaves and he could look down properly.

Um. That had not looked like *nearly* so long a drop from the bottom as it did from the top.

Wei Wuxian chuckled at his sudden discomfiture – which, okay, Wen Yuan was honest enough to admit that he probably looked like a kitten rethinking its tree-climbing plans after it had already gotten to the top. Then—

Oh. Wow. That wasn't *anything* like the wirework and green-screen acrobatics from xianxia shows. Except for maybe the *really* high-budget stuff… but even that tended to slip into *gravity? Momentum? Velocity? Never heard of them!* Which was fine in shows, suspension of disbelief was a thing…

Wei Wuxian didn't float. He just… hopped off, twisted in the air like a cat, and landed on the veranda like… like he'd just fallen almost four meters *and it wasn't a big deal*.

I want to learn how to do that!

Taking a deep breath half to steady himself and half to remind himself firmly that now was *not the time*, Wen Yuan scooted forward until he was only barely perched on the edge of the roof. Making himself focus just on Wei Wuxian's inviting smile, he gulped, and pushed off.

Wei Wuxian caught him easily, which was impressive – Wen Yuan knew (hoped!) he still had a growth spurt or two to go, but he wasn't exactly tiny, and while he didn't do sports outside the odd pickup game, he *was* athletic and that made him heavy for his size. But Wei Wuxian didn't even stumble, just deftly turned as he caught Wen Yuan so that some of that downward momentum bled off as angular momentum instead, and then Wen Yuan was standing on the veranda, with barely a thump as his feet touched down.

He opened his mouth to thank the man, and started laughing instead. "That was *fun*!"

Wei Wuxian laughed, obviously amused by his enthusiasm. Then the man hesitated, eyes flicking to the door of the main room.

Lan Wangji stood in the open doorway, watching them. His face was set and stony, but Wen Yuan could see the way he was carefully keeping his hands tucked behind his back; that was uncertainty, not disapproval.

Well, *mostly* not disapproval, although Wen Yuan suspected he was in for a lecture about climbing around on rooftops.

Wei Wuxian just grinned, bouncing a little. “Breakfast?” he asked, eyes big and wide and hopeful, and Wen Yuan had to bite back a laugh. That was *silly*, and absolutely, one hundred percent intentionally so.

Dealing with Wei Wuxian *really* drove home the whole lesson Professor Lan liked to give about people of the past being *people*.

Lan Wangji huffed at the theatrics, but he also relaxed slightly, apparently relieved that Wei Wuxian seemed to be holding no grudge against him as the bearer of bad news.

To be honest, Wen Yuan had sort of expected at least *some* awkwardness – but Wei Wuxian simply headed into the main room and started laying out the things for breakfast; apparently Lan Wangji had spent the time they’d been up on the roof rearranging the room to its usual configuration. Since Wei Wuxian seemed determined to carry on as if it were a normal morning… Wen Yuan mentally shrugged and went to prepare the tea.

As he was pouring it out into the cups, Wei Wuxian suddenly began laughing. Startled, he looked up to see that the man was grinning at Lan Wangji’s guqin on its stand. “What is it?” he asked.

Wei Wuxian grinned at him, then pointed imperiously at Lan Wangji as he set the bowl of zhou on the table next to the youtiao. “I was correct!” he announced, sounding very pleased with himself.

Lan Wangji straightened, staring back in a silent request for clarification.

Still grinning, Wei Wuxian bounced across the room to poke the professor in the chest playfully. “You *are* Gusu Lan,” he said.

Wen Yuan blinked, trying to remember where… Oh! Right – the first day, Wei Wuxian had asked something about *Gusu Lan*, when he’d been trying to figure out more about where he was and who they were…

Wait. “I thought Cloud Recesses was established in the Tang?” He looked at Lan Wangji. “But if he knew about it…”

“Do not assume,” Lan Wangji reminded him, and then hesitated. “The evidence is suggestive, however.” He seemed to think for a moment – then, unexpectedly, he turned and walked out the back door to the veranda. Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian blinked at each other, taken aback, but Lan Wangji quickly returned, carrying a roll of paper. When he spread it out on the table, Wen Yuan realized that it was the rough timeline he’d made to illustrate how much time had passed.

“Wei Wuxian,” he said, and then paused, obviously trying to properly frame his question. Finally, he asked, “You were… when?”

Wei Wuxian blinked, then looked at the timeline, apparently doing some calculations in his head. After a moment, he tapped the line marking the official beginning of the Sui Dynasty. “This – twenty-five years…” He hesitated. “In front?”

“Before,” Wen Yuan suggested. Which, wow. Kind of wild to think about living *that* close to something that was such a big piece of history… and yes, he knew that it wasn’t really that odd in the grand scheme of things, by that scale *they* were pretty close to some huge events, but…

Wow. There had been *so much* going on in that time period. Hou Jing’s usurpation of the Liang dynasty in the southern regions, and then the Chen dynasty, not to mention the whole fall of the Northern Zhou and the rise of Yang Jian to become Emperor Wen of the Sui and the reunification of China – for that matter, the original Yiling Laozu legend was all tied up in Yang Jian’s story, the whole legend about the future Emperor Wen being raised by an immortal ascendant. Not to mention all the stories about this or that warlord’s angry ghost rising up for vengeance. All of that would have been *just starting*!

Although… figuring out how everything fit together was probably going to be pretty hard. The records from that era were messy, just because there’d been *so* many wars and power plays and family feuds all happening at once. Most history books just threw up their metaphorical hands and sort of skimmed over the details…

“Oh!” Wen Yuan blurted, almost forgetting to put the teapot down before he dove for the pile of bags he’d left in the corner – he hadn’t unpacked the previous evening, since they were still figuring out how to arrange three people in a house that was designed for one. Grabbing the pack full of books that Nie Mingjue had complained so much about the previous day, he quickly pulled out the textbooks, burrowing his way down to the bottom of the bag.

“Wen Yuan.” Lan Wangji’s tone somehow managed to be half curious and half chiding without actually changing his inflection in any way that Wen Yuan could actually put his finger on.

“Just a minute, I… Got it!” Turning, he set the book on the end of the table, away from the food, and grinned at Wei Wuxian’s curious look. “This is for you,” he explained, giving the book a push to slide it towards the cultivator.

Well, slide it a little. It was big. And thick. And *heavy*. Which, well, that was to be expected from any book that actually *deserved* to be titled *A Complete History of the Middle Kingdom*.

“I researched it,” he explained to Lan Wangji’s skeptical stare, as Wei Wuxian picked the book up, eyes widening at the heft of it. “The poetry helps, but it only goes so far. But this was written for laypeople, they were careful about making the language accessible – I thought it would be a good place to start him on really *reading*. And it’s not in-depth,” of course it wasn’t, the thickest book in the *world* couldn’t cover a solid four thousand years of recorded history without *some* abridging, “but it’s accurate and well-written. And…”

And there was *so much* history to cover, if Wei Wuxian was going to get caught up on how the world had changed. Right now, he didn’t even know enough to know what questions he should be asking! And… it didn’t feel right to make him rely just on the two of them for answers. This way, he could start getting the broad strokes of the story in his own time and at his own pace.

Granted, the book really *was* a bit much. There was no need to go all the way back to the Shang dynasty just to catch Wei Wuxian up on what had happened since *his* time. But there weren't a lot of histories that went from his time to the present, most of them started with the Tang or the Song and sort of assumed you already knew the stuff that had come before that, and none of them were as well-reviewed as this one.

Besides – it would be really interesting to see what Wei Wuxian thought of what they said about his own history today, compared to how he had learned it.

"Mn." Lan Wangji didn't seem convinced, but he let it go, glancing back at Wen Yuan's book bag instead. "You have others?"

"A few," Wen Yuan admitted, because once he'd had the idea, he'd just sort of… naturally expanded on it. And he'd been ordering the poetry book and the history book anyway, and they'd given him a pretty good budget and free rein, so…

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully as Wen Yuan pulled out the other books he'd gotten. A world history – because beyond a certain point you *needed* a wider knowledge of the world to understand what had happened in China. A "How the World Works" book, along with one on the great inventions of the world – hopefully the two together would make for a pretty good introduction to modern science and technology, even for someone who hadn't even encountered some of it yet. And…

Lan Wangji side-eyed him. Judgingly.

Wen Yuan blinked innocently, still holding the xianxia novel. "I figured he'd get a laugh out of it. And you have said that understanding the stories people tell is important to understanding the way they think about things." Not to mention that after playing catch-up on so much history and technological development… well, it would probably be good for Wei Wuxian to get to be the expert on something.

Yes, Wen Yuan was *absolutely* fantasizing about cultivation lessons and he was not ashamed to admit it. To himself, at least.

Lan Wangji huffed, but he let Wen Yuan add the novel to the stack of references. Probably because *he* wanted to know about cultivating, too. Not to mention that he'd been the one to recommend that particular series to Wen Yuan in the first place, so!

Although he kept it to the side, because it was definitely going to need its own separate explanation before they could get into kibitzing it.

Wei Wuxian made a startled sound, drawing their attention, and… Oh. He'd found the maps inside the front cover of the history book – a series of maps of China produced across the centuries, culminating in a detailed geopolitical map of the present day… followed by a glorious, glossy, full color, high definition, foldout photograph of the region taken by satellite.

Oh yeah. That was *absolutely* worth staring at. Wen Yuan had stared, too, the first time he'd opened the book and seen it. Grinning, Wen Yuan moved over to sit next to the man—

“Wen Yuan.” Lan Wangji looked pointedly at the breakfast things laid out.

Oh. Right. No books or talking during meals. Although…

Wen Yuan looked pointedly at the timeline still spread out on the table, then raised his eyebrows at the professor. *You started it*. “Just this once. He has to have *so* many questions!”

Lan Wangji’s expression didn’t change, but he could *feel* the chagrin – especially when Wei Wuxian, clearly sensing that the professor was wavering, turned a wide-eyed, hopeful look on him.

Lan Wangji sighed and began portioning out the zhou. Which was basically permission, and Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian traded grins when he wasn’t looking. Victory!

Rising from the table, Lan Wangji began gathering the dishes, waving Wei Wuxian back to his seat when the man made as if to get up and help. Wei Wuxian hesitated for a moment, but ultimately the lure of the books was too strong; by the time Lan Wangji returned for the last of the dishes, Wei Wuxian and Wen Yuan were bent over his new books again, just as they had been for the entire meal.

Lan Wangji huffed, and did not smile at the sight. So far as he could tell, they weren’t actually *reading* anything – which, to be fair, would be a quite intensive project at Wei Wuxian’s current level of language acquisition, no matter how accessible the text might be. But they weren’t just looking at pictures, either.

Or rather, they had been looking at pictures, until they hit the chapter in the great inventions book on the development of printing. Now they were working their way through the diagrams together, Wei Wuxian studying the sketches and schematics with a keen-eyed fascination. Which… was not surprising, really. It had been obvious from the moment he’d carefully dismantled and then reassembled that mechanical pencil that the man had a sharply analytical mind and a fascination with figuring out how things worked. It had shown in his discussion of lingfu the previous night; he had a very technical approach to understanding how each part functioned.

It made Lan Wangji wonder. Was the mystique and mysticism associated with lingfu simply the result of outside observers attempting to understand a complex set of skills? Or had Wei Wuxian been unusual even among cultivators, with his openness to new ideas leading him to look for ways to innovate beyond the accepted and traditional?

Wen Yuan turned the page, revealing a full-spread diagram of a Gutenberg-style printing press, and Lan Wangji had to fight to keep his expression still at the bright-eyed enthusiasm of Wei Wuxian’s reaction. Wen Yuan had discussed the idea of getting histories and other references to help introduce Wei Wuxian to the modern world, but Lan Wangji hadn’t realized the boy had actually researched and acquired some. But clearly he had chosen well.

And… in hindsight, it was fortunate that he *had* chosen to acquire them in advance. Having them immediately available was convenient, yes, but more importantly, the fact that Wen Yuan had immediately provided them was proof that they *had* intended to reveal the truth to

Wei Wuxian eventually, even if he had ultimately beaten them to it. Hopefully that proof would help restore the credibility that Lan Wangji's hesitation had cost them.

Wei Wuxian was no fool, after all. Surely he understood how difficult it would be to broach such a topic when their ability to communicate was so limited.

Setting aside the last of the cups on the rack to dry, Lan Wangji considered what to do next. He had already sent brief messages to Wen Qing and his uncle, informing them of the morning's development; doubtless both of them were anxiously awaiting further details, and to consult regarding their next steps…

But he was in no temper for any I-told-you-so's. Justified or not. Perhaps *especially* if justified.

Lan Wangji paused, considering that last thought, and mentally shook his head. That was his answer, then. If he was sufficiently out of sorts that he could not master his own temper, then it would be best to avoid entering into what would no doubt be intense and potentially confrontational discussions until he had regained his equilibrium.

With that in mind… Finished tidying the kitchen, Lan Wangji crossed the main room, careful not to disturb the pair still engrossed in the books at the table, and headed for his own room to change. His own morning routine had been thoroughly disrupted by the events of the morning; getting his workout in, even belatedly, would help settle his mood.

He did hesitate briefly as he pulled a workout shirt over his head, when his eye landed on the book he'd been reading the night before. The better part of his time these past few weeks, he had spent on familiarizing himself with language education theory and researching answers to Wei Wuxian's questions. But he'd been using his evening reading to refresh his knowledge of the disunified era, hoping to establish a better understanding in his mind of the cultural and historic context that Wei Wuxian came from. However…

Wen Yuan was correct that Wei Wuxian's most pressing need, at the moment, was to acquire a general understanding of the course of history between his time and their own, to better understand the how and why of the world's changes. But… eventually, the man would surely want to know what had become of his own world – the people and places that he had known personally.

That would be tricky; the records of the mid-500s were sketchy at best, even with the discovery of the archives in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang, with all the attendant issues of retrospective historiography, myth-making, post-hoc legitimization and vendettas that came with a history written by the victors. The simple fact that Lan Wangji had not recognized the names Yunmeng Jiang or Gusu Lan was already a clear sign that the historical record was incomplete.

Finding answers for Wei Wuxian would likely involve extensive research; it would not be done easily or quickly. And it would require Wei Wuxian's knowledge and assistance. But… perhaps he could start the process now, at least in terms of building a framework of what *was* known from which they could identify the gaps in their knowledge.

Nodding inwardly to himself, Lan Wangji finished lacing his shoes and stepped out into the garden for his workout.

After the upheavals of the morning, he would have preferred to go running; he found the steady rhythm meditative and the combination of physical effort and mental quiet conducive to sifting through disordered thoughts. But he'd done a run the day before… and by now it was late enough in the morning for other runners to be out on the trails, which was less than appealing for his purposes and preferences.

So he went through his strength routine instead, although allowing for his unsettled mental state, he opted to keep to the simpler moves. Still, it served its purpose. By the time he'd finished his routine, his muscles were burning and his mind was clear and calm as he settled into the first Tai Chi stance.

Movement caught his eye as he did so; glancing over, he saw that Wen Yuan had joined him in the garden, as he often did when visiting. A second glance showed Wei Wuxian sitting on the veranda, watching them with interest; apparently they had decided to take a break from the books for a while. He seemed curious about the slow sequence of stances, which… made sense, actually. Tai Chi might have roots in older forms, but the style itself had developed in the 1500s at the earliest.

In a rare moment of sudden impulsiveness, Lan Wangji beckoned with one hand, inviting the cultivator to join them. Wei Wuxian blinked, then grinned, hopping down into the garden and assuming the first stance along with them.

Then Lan Wangji centered. Settled. Breathed.

Moved.

Wen Yuan kept pace quite ably. No great surprise; he'd been practicing Tai Chi before he'd met Lan Wangji, after Wen Qing's brother had suggested it as a way for a frightened boy whose life had been uprooted too frequently and in too quick succession to work through emotions that he wasn't ready or able to verbalize yet. Wei Wuxian was more hesitant, moving a half-heartbeat behind them as he watched their moves, but his movements were smooth and steady and confident, the unfamiliarity of the stances offset by perfect muscle control and an easy knowledge of his own body.

And, it seemed, an intuitive understanding of the flow of motion. With each shift in stance, that momentary hesitation grew less and less, until, by the end of the sequence, only a sharp-eyed and experienced observer would notice the subtle flicker of lag between their motions and his.

Although… there was something odd in how he watched them. At first, he had simply been curious. But even as he settled into the rhythm of the stances, the intrigued look in his eyes… shifted, as his gaze flicked back and forth between Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan. He seemed almost puzzled, as if trying to figure something out.

As they finished the sequence, Lan Wangji hesitated, wondering if the man would say something. But Wei Wuxian simply found a seat on one of the decorative stones, settling

unprompted into the lotus position and slipping easily into meditation.

Lan Wangji bit back an unseemly and inappropriate sense of disappointment. He had no particular right to expect Wei Wuxian to share every thought with him, not when the man was clearly deep in contemplation… and under normal circumstances, he should have been irritated at the thought of someone interrupting his focus by speaking, not frustrated that he had not!

Ridiculous! he chided himself, and resolutely settled down to meditate, determined to focus.

After several deep breaths, he managed to call back the steady mindset that was both present and detached, focused and open, that the routine established. After so many years of practice, it was one he could slip into readily, even distracted. Then he called back to mind the visualization from the exercise – although for him, it was as much kinesthetic as visual, a sense of humming warmth and light. He had gathered it together through motion; now in stillness he let it flow through him, energizing him for another day's work—

Wen Yuan yelped. "Hey!"

Startled, Lan Wangji blinked the world back into focus. And then blinked again. Wen Yuan had sat facing both of them, so that they'd formed a small circle for meditating…

Except that now Wei Wuxian was standing in front of the boy, one finger hovering over the boy's forehead. The man's other hand was on his hip, and he was giving Wen Yuan the chiding look of a disappointed teacher.

Wen Yuan rubbed a small red mark on his forehead. "What was that for?" he asked, more confused than complaining.

Rather than answering, Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji. "You are his teacher," he said.

Lan Wangji could only blink, at a loss. Clearly, Wei Wuxian was expecting *something* from him… but he had no idea what. Had he perhaps miscommunicated something when he'd identified himself as Wen Yuan's mentor? Or possibly it was less miscommunication and more changed expectations regarding *what* a mentor would be expected to teach…

Something of his confusion must have shown in his bearing; after a moment, Wei Wuxian tilted his head slightly, his expectant expression shifting, becoming intrigued, as if Lan Wangji's unexpected hesitation had somehow confirmed some unlikely suspicion.

Then the man sighed dramatically and turned back to Wen Yuan. "Not *here*," he scolded, poking the boy in the forehead again. Then he lowered his finger—

Except that something about the motion wasn't simply *moving*, but *pulling*, as if his finger was drawing something else down with it…

—and stopped at Wen Yuan's lower stomach, just beneath the navel. "Put qi *here*," he said sternly.

And Wen Yuan…

Wen Yuan's eyes had flown wide, his jaw hanging slack with shock as he stared at Wei Wuxian's finger. Then he looked up to meet Lan Wangji's eyes.

"I *felt* that," he breathed.

Oh.

Oh.

Tai Chi was rooted in much older qigong philosophies and practices. He knew that; it was why he'd always diligently practiced the meditative and visualization aspects, rather than simply approaching it as physical exercise alone.

But somehow, he hadn't connected that to the realization that *cultivation was real*. Hadn't considered that the psychosomatic feeling of warmth and energy that accompanied his visualization exercises… might not be entirely psychosomatic.

The discipline was… incomplete. It had to be, or else cultivation would not be thought the stuff of folklore and films. Something was missing between the modern practice and true cultivation, some key step or concept…

And Wei Wuxian had that missing knowledge.

He could *teach someone to cultivate*.

Wen Qing exhaled and didn't even care that the quaver in it was loud enough for the microphone to pick it up. The only people on the call were Lan Wangji, who looked equally shaken despite having been the one to deliver the news, and Lan Qiren… who honestly looked like his whole being had blue-screened on him.

"I'll be honest," she admitted. "I don't know if the idea is thrilling or terrifying."

Really, it was both. Thrilling because it opened up so many possibilities. Terrifying because those possibilities came with an equal number of sheer unknowns.

Not the least of which was the burning question: how had cultivation been lost in the first place?

It was easy to overlook when it had been just a matter of *Wei Wuxian* doing impossible things; the man was already a living impossibility in so many ways, what was one more? But thinking of it as an *art*, a set of skills that could be *taught and learned*…

People didn't just *forget* about useful skills!

Then she had to huff at herself inside her own head. Because of course people did. Either because no one bothered to mention little details like *of course you use salt water to make concrete, everyone knows that*, or the art was restricted enough, by secrecy or limitations of access, that the loss of just a few key people to misfortune or misadventure – or the scheming of those who didn't want such abilities to exist outside their control – could send the whole

system crashing down. See the ongoing efforts to figure out how Damascus steel had actually been made.

But it also raised the uneasy possibility of some unknown issue or complication that had led people to *choose* to abandon it as not worth the attendant risks. What then?

On the screen, Lan Qiren visibly shook himself. “We must consider the implications carefully,” he said. “The rest of the project can rightfully argue that to pursue this would violate Doctor Wen’s moratorium on research without consent.”

She could only make out the barest hint of pursing on Lan Wangji’s lips. Given the man’s normal stony lack of expression, that alone spoke volumes. “Professors Yao and Liu consider any form of interaction to which they are not invited proof of illegitimate research.”

Wen Qing carefully did not snort at that. The man was not exactly *wrong*.

Although she did have to grant that they were walking a very delicate line when it came to consent. After all, they *were* learning things from Wei Wuxian with every interaction; it was impossible not to. Failure to observe and record would have the scientific community up in arms about *unscientific* and *loss of priceless data*. But the act of recording could equally be condemned as a violation of privacy and consent.

Thus far, Lan Wangji had threaded that needle by keeping careful and copious notes on everything he learned, because that was the academically responsible thing to do. But it was also deeply invasive, and so he was withholding those notes until Wei Wuxian had the opportunity to review them for himself and decide what contents he did and did not want bandied about as public information. As with all compromises, the end result was that no one was *happy* with the outcome, but – for the time being – they could live with it.

Not that you would know that, listening to the whinging of certain parties.

At least Wei Wuxian *knew*, now – and she could only thank every benevolent ancestor watching over them that he had taken the discovery so well. For all her warnings to Lan Wangji about finding rotted axe handles, she hadn’t actually expected the man to figure everything out on his own! But it did mean they were one step closer to making their way out of the ethical conundrum they’d found themselves in.

Lan Qiren harrumphed – although he did not, she noted, actually contradict Lan Wangji’s observation, a clear sign that the bellyaching of the more entitled scholars on the project were trying even *his* admittedly limited patience. “And of course it is difficult to recruit an ethnographer or other cultural specialist to the project when I cannot explain why their expertise would be required,” he grumbled.

Wen Qing stared at the screen. Lan Wangji blinked.

Lan Qiren bristled at their disbelief. “Having reviewed the project and the revised research proposals to date, it has become quite obvious that the current makeup of the project is inadequate, given the changed circumstances. Many of the specialties of the current project members no longer apply, while we lack researchers with expertise in necessary fields. Lan

Xichen and I have been creating an updated research prospectus to guide the search for new project members, but there are… obstacles."

Wen Qing carefully did not let her lips twitch with dry amusement. *Obstacles*. That was certainly one way of putting it. Obstacles starting with *we can't tell people why we want them* and *even if we could tell them they wouldn't believe us*.

Still, she allowed herself a sigh of relief. She might have her own issues, *serious* issues, with the way the immediate aftermath of Wei Wuxian's awakening had been handled. But she recognized that Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen were excellent administrators. Now that they were finally taking the implications of Wei Wuxian being a living, breathing *person* seriously, she thought she could trust them to create a project plan in line with all the best practices in the field.

Although she still intended to review the results *very carefully*.

"Has anyone withdrawn from the project?" Lan Wangji asked.

Wen Qing huffed. They should be so fortunate.

Lan Qiren was far too dignified to grimace, but his beard *twitched* ever so slightly, as if he very much might want to do so. "Some have chosen to step back from direct involvement with the project, as their own research focus is no longer appropriate. But all have chosen to remain involved in some capacity."

No surprise there. No successful academic would simply give up a connection to a project that was already famous and about to achieve in-the-history-books notoriety, no matter *how* mismatched their personal research might be.

Of course, the high profile of the Yiling Laozu project was its own obstacle. People would *notice* if they started reaching out to bring new experts and consultants in, especially after Lan Qiren's infamously hard-nosed selection process for the original research group. Notice, and wonder. And *talk*.

"Has there been any progress on making plans about going public?" she asked. After all, they couldn't sit on the truth of what had happened forever. The world was going to find out eventually. Better it be on their terms, because she doubted that the general public would take that revelation with the easy equanimity Wei Wuxian himself had.

And she suspected the man was not nearly so calm as he sought to appear.

Lan Qiren paused. "I have discussed the matter with Nie Mingjue. It seems his brother has some expertise in that area." His lips pursed in a grouchy moue of dissatisfaction. "I am… dubious of the merits of relying on a dilettante for such serious matters… but needs must."

Wen Qing had to sympathize. She'd met Nie Mingjue's younger brother a few times in passing – usually when a particularly messy campus incident had kept Nie Mingjue on the job longer than expected, and Nie Huaisang called to whine about it. As a first impression, she had to admit it was… less than confidence-inducing.

On the other hand, one could make the argument that when it came to managing public opinion, a social butterfly was *exactly* the sort of person with the skillset they needed. And if Nie Huaisang came off as a career troublemaker… Well. As she'd noted with Wei Wuxian himself, troublemakers tended to be far more adaptable than those who expected the world to follow predictable rules.

More importantly, they needed *someone* with a better feel for the pulse of the general public than a bunch of cloistered hyper-academics who preferred research articles to opinion columns, but the same obstacles to bringing in ethnographers and other cultural experts applied here as well. People would sit up and pay attention if a famously controversial research project suddenly started headhunting for a PR manager. Which meant that they had to rely on personal connections… and for most of them, their social circles just consisted of still more hyper-academics. At least she could trust that, little brother or not, Nie Mingjue took the security situation seriously enough that if he'd recommended Nie Huaisang, then he genuinely thought the man could, in fact, handle the job. It wouldn't exactly do them any favors when the inevitable accusations of nepotism started pouring in, but between Lan Qiren's inclusion of his nephews and Wen Yuan's participation, that ship had sailed before the thawing had even started.

"In the meantime," Lan Qiren continued, "I would like an update on your vaccination timeline, Doctor Wen."

"Wei Wuxian just received a significant emotional shock," she answered, pulling her thoughts back into order. "I would rather give him some time to process that before I subject his immune system to additional stress. That said, I think we're in a good position now to start establishing the conceptual groundwork for vaccination."

Wen Yuan's stack of books would definitely help with that. The histories would certainly lay out a context for the many plagues that had come and gone and turned up again across the ages, while the book on great inventions definitely covered the development of vaccines. Between the two, she was fairly confident that they would be able to explain the principles behind vaccination and the reasons for their urgency.

Lan Qiren frowned, although she thought it was more a thoughtful twist on his default resting scowl than actual dissatisfaction. "You also have submitted a change to the proposed vaccination course. Why?"

Huh. He'd actually read it? Perhaps it was unfair to be surprised by that, but she was.

"Wei Wuxian has several anomalous factors that might influence his reaction to vaccination," she explained. Which was the most neutral way she could say *he can meditate injuries away and so I'm not even sure a vaccination would take.* "Given that… while the original schedule addressed the most urgent vaccinations, I think it would be best to begin with something relatively innocuous, so I can assess if modifications will be necessary to accommodate his unusual recovery methods."

Which would *yet again* skirt dangerously close to the line of illicit research, and yet again, she didn't see any better options available to them.

Wen Qing pursed her lips thoughtfully. “To return to our previous discussion… I believe that, so long as Wei Wuxian is *volunteering* to teach us about cultivation, on his own initiative, that does not violate our ethical obligations – at least so long as we follow our established procedures and do not disseminate that information without his express permission.”

That got her a dour look; after all, within the scientific community *not* disseminating information was itself unethical. Ignoring it, she added, “Moreover, as a physician I think it would be good for him. Keeping busy, within reasonable limits, is an effective way to cope with and work through the grieving process.” She looked at Lan Wangji. “I will forward you some of the relevant literature regarding trauma survivors.” The scope and nature of Wei Wuxian’s specific experience might be unique, but trauma was still trauma.

Lan Qiren huffed disdainfully, not quietly enough to even pretend at discretion. Wen Qing deliberately ignored his pointed scorn. Lan Qiren was from a generation that saw therapy as a sop for the weak-willed and trauma as something *real* men – and it was *always* about men and manliness in the end! – should be able to simply power through.

Pity. Given Lan Qiren’s habit of ignoring or attacking anything that challenged his idea of the way the world should work, Wen Qing was of the opinion that he’d probably benefit from counseling himself. But, he hadn’t asked her opinion, and in the end he was responsible for his own problems.

Still. She might drop a suggestion to Lan Xichen that they consider putting a psychological expert on retainer. If nothing else, to better understand the mental aspect of cultivation. And someone who could keep an eye on the mental health of *all* people involved in the project would not go amiss.

Lan Wangji likewise ignored Lan Qiren’s response. “That would be appreciated, Doctor. Seeing how much Cloud Recesses alone has changed must have been a shock.”

Lan Qiren made a dismissive gesture. “See that you follow the recommended best practices, then,” he said brusquely. As if he hadn’t been the one ignoring her advice on best practices before she all but literally hit him over the head with them!

Still, Wen Qing bit back the urge to snap back. Lan Qiren’s brusqueness hadn’t been his usual prideful bristling this time. He seemed almost distracted, as if turning something over in his mind.

Then he turned to Lan Wangji, his usual acerbic edge suddenly absent. “He truly recognized Cloud Recesses? From his own time?”

She blinked. That was *wonder* in the old goat’s tone.

Then again, of course it was. Cloud Recesses had always been proud of its long history, but to learn that said history ran even *deeper* than they’d thought… anyone would marvel at that.

And Lan Qiren was an archaeologist. For all his hardheadedness, he couldn’t be entirely immune to the allure of the past.

Lan Wangji nodded. “He recognized the Cold Springs as a place he visited in his youth. It seems that, at that time, they belonged to a group known as the Gusu Lan.”

Lan Qiren exhaled slowly. “So Cloud Recesses was founded at least a hundred years earlier than our recorded history… There must have been records lost in the transition period. I would very much like to know that story.”

Lan Wangji’s face was as stony as ever, but Wen Qing got the distinct feeling that the man was amused. “I suspect that, given time, Wei Wuxian would be happy to share what he knows.”

“Aw, come on. Just an itsy bitsy *bitty* little hint?”

Wen Yuan smiled – the serene, mysterious, knowing smile that he knew for a fact was absolutely *infuriating*. Seriously, it was way, *way* too easy to wind Lan Jingyi up.

On his screen, Ouyang Zizhen huffed. “You’re being ridiculous. He *told* us that the work on the Yiling Laozu project was going to be strictly confidential,” he said.

Lan Jingyi wrinkled his nose in annoyance. “Like you aren’t curious, too? I remember how excited you were when he told us about the internship!”

“Well of *course* I was!” Ouyang Zizhen said eagerly, waving his hands in the air in total disregard for the physics equations he had supposedly been working on during their video call. “It’s such a romantically tragic story – a beautiful man from the distant past, sealed away forever in the ice, eternally young and untouchable!”

Wen Yuan tried not to wince at that. In the abstract, Ouyang Zizhen wasn’t wrong, it really did sound like the makings of an epic romantic tragedy.

Tragedy got a lot less *romantic* when he started thinking about it in terms of an actual person.

It was worse when he considered that Wei Wuxian actually really *was* young – about Mo Xuanyu’s age, not that much older than Wen Yuan even! Which… yeah, in his head he’d known that, but it was different when he was actually interacting with the man and found himself thinking that Wei Wuxian almost felt like the playful older brother he’d always wanted.

“What’s romantic about being *dead*?” Jin Ling scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest and totally messing up the neatly pressed lines of his designer shirt. “And I’m pretty sure that *eternally untouchable* and *sealed away forever* don’t really apply when the point of the project is to *get rid of the ice*.”

Lan Jingyi rolled his eyes and loftily ignored Jin Ling’s sniping – it was something of a running argument between the two. “I just think it’s weird that they’re making you stay all the way up there the *whole time*,” he insisted. “We were gonna hang out this summer!”

Wen Yuan smiled sheepishly, because they *had* had plans before everything happened with the project… but before he could say anything, Jin Ling snorted loudly.

"Maybe he decided that hanging around watching a bunch of old guys chop up a dead body for science sounded more interesting," the younger boy sneered.

"*Jin Ling!*" Ouyang Zizhen snapped as Lan Jingyi spluttered, genuinely angry this time.

Wen Yuan frowned. Because yes, Jin Ling tended to be downright caustic when it came to the Yiling Laozu project. As far as Wen Yuan could tell, it came from a weird mix of being genuinely interested but worried that it wasn't a "cool enough" sort of interest, and bitterness about being sent to Linyi way out in Shandong for the summer right as the project was actually happening. But even as snappish as Jin Ling could be, that had been downright *nasty*. And his left hand was fiddling with the purple cord of the charm he always had in his pocket.

"Jin Ling. Is everything okay?" he asked, gently but pointedly.

Bingo. Jin Ling immediately sniffed and looked away from his camera, a sure tell-tale that he *knew* he'd crossed a line but wasn't willing to admit it. "What are you talking about?!" he bristled. "I'm doing *great*! I've got a whole freaking mansion all to myself out here, except for when the old guy wants to do a photo op for the press! It's *awesome*!"

Ah. Wen Yuan carefully bit down the urge to wince, knowing that any hint of sympathy would only make Jin Ling even more defensive. He tried so hard to pretend that it didn't hurt that his grandfather had only taken him in – after *years* of being bounced around in the system – because as a high-ranking official in the party Jin Guangshan had decided it would be good for his image to make a show of Proper Family Values, and Jin Ling had grown into a nicely photogenic preteen. Jin Ling insisted that it wasn't that big of a deal; Jin Guangshan got his sappy show of reuniting with his estranged son's long-lost child and Jin Ling got fancy clothes and the best schools and otherwise left to his own business…

But Wen Yuan also remembered how *devastated* Jin Ling had been when he'd learned that he'd been skipped several grades, not out of his own academic merit, but because Jin Guangshan had bribed the school so he could brag about his grandson being a child prodigy.

Which was part of how they'd met, actually. Jin Ling had been younger and smaller than everyone in their class, dumped in the middle of the school year into a new school where he didn't know anyone and drowning in a curriculum he wasn't anywhere near ready for, and the school had assigned Wen Yuan to show him around. Which had sort of naturally morphed into tutoring and Lan Jingyi developing a mysterious and incurable allergy to any hint of bullying while Ouyang Zizhen had concocted wilder and wilder stories to explain away the black eyes and bruised knuckles, and somewhere in the midst of it all they'd ended up friends.

Unfortunately, the situation with Jin Ling's grandfather was beyond their ability to solve – regardless of Lan Jingyi's occasional muttering about what it would take to hire a hitman on a student's budget. So instead Wen Yuan just said, "Does anyone else think there's a typo in the

third question? Because I *can't* get it to make sense." And made sure to offer his best butter-wouldn't-melt smile when Jin Ling eyed him suspiciously.

The best thing about Lan Jingyi: despite his bad habit of engaging his mouth before his brain, he was actually really quick on the uptake. One blink, and he *got* it, and let out a dramatic groan as he slumped forward to bang his head on his textbook. "Oh *man*, it got you too? At least now I feel a little less stupid about getting stuck!"

Jin Ling snorted. "I don't think that's just a matter of *feeling*," he said, but the brittle edge was gone and they were back to his baseline snarky state of existence, and when Wen Yuan made his apologies and signed off the video call he was feeling… okay, maybe not great, Jin Ling's situation was just plain *not right*. But better, at least.

Then he groaned and flopped face-down onto his physics book, because seriously, this was *so hard*!

…Okay, yes, and he was also having way too much fun with it. The guys were going to *murder* him when the news broke, he intended to milk the mystery for all it was worth while he still could.

But that didn't make it any easier to sit there listening to the guys talking about Yiling Laozu with this big huge secret lurking in the back of his head and threatening to explode out every time he opened his mouth!

He sighed and straightened. Lan Wangji was still in his office, and Wei Wuxian was outside somewhere, making himself scarce so they could do their stuff. Which meant this was his chance to get more of his schoolwork out of the way so he could focus on the project!

…Except he had *not* been kidding about that third physics question being a stumper. Three attempts and three *different* impossible answers later, Wen Yuan was slumped over his textbook again for a completely different reason. *Augh*!

"A'Yuan?"

He yelped, hastily straightening up and trying to look *dignified* rather than like he'd been literally banging his head on his homework in the hopes of discovering the solution through percussive osmosis…

Wait. This was Wei Wuxian. So far as he cared, dignity was crunchy and best served fried in chili oil.

And he was grinning in a way that said he wasn't the least bit fooled. "Studies?" he asked knowingly.

Well. Since dignity was pretty much futile anyway…

Slumping over his uncooperative answer sheet, Wen Yuan groaned.

The dramatics did at least score him a laugh as the man took the implicit permission to come into the main room and settle down at the table as well. Putting something down on the floor

next to him, Wei Wuxian reached across the table and pulled Wen Yuan's book towards himself, flipping it around to study the contents more closely.

He considered the unfamiliar diagrams and equations for a minute or two, flicking back and forth between pages a few times but carefully keeping Wen Yuan's place. Then he looked up. "Will you explain to me?"

Wen Yuan blinked. Was he really asking… Okay, yes, he really was. Oh boy, this might take a while…

Which, yes, it did. There were *so* many words they had to figure out, even just to get through the basic concepts! Even with Wei Wuxian's rapidly expanding vocabulary, it was a *lot*.

Actually… come to think of it, they should probably get him a dictionary. There weren't really any good bilingual classical-to-modern dictionaries available, not for the sort of words he really needed… but he was getting to the stage where just a basic modern Mandarin dictionary would be useful, at least for learning the words in terms of their context and nuances within the language itself. He remembered reading something about that being an important transition in language acquisition – moving from thinking in your own language and trying to translate it, to actually *speaking* the new language.

Although, really, the fact that Wei Wuxian was anywhere near that stage at all after only a few weeks, when he was learning as an adult…

Huh. The stories talked about cultivation being about immortality and eternal youth… did that translate over to the brain, too? Could Wei Wuxian sort of *meditate* himself into the neural plasticity that let kids learn stuff faster and better?

…*man*, that would be so handy in school…

Although… actually, after the first brain-flip of trying to go from solving physics equations to explaining what physics even was… well, Wen Yuan found himself actually getting into it. He knew in his head that the ability to translate motion into numbers had been a seriously revolutionary change in how people understood the world – or at least he knew that *now*, after discovering that physics as a system was *listed in the great inventions book* and the brain-bendy realization that, oh yeah, physics as a field of study was a thing that people had *invented*. But it felt different when he had Wei Wuxian listening with wide-eyed fascination and then demanding demonstrations of how it worked. Which meant flipping back to earlier problem sets to show him how the basic building blocks fit together, and it was kind of fun to be dealing with questions he could actually answer, and even explain.

Finally, he handed a set of problems to Wei Wuxian to poke at, and turned back to his own homework.

And blinked. After all that review, suddenly that third problem made *so much more sense*…

Startled, he looked up… and realized Wei Wuxian was watching him with a knowing smirk.

"You did that on purpose!" he blurted.

Wei Wuxian cackled at him, reaching over to poke Wen Yuan between the eyes with the eraser of the pencil he'd borrowed. "You teach, you learn," he said smugly.

Wen Yuan huffed… then started laughing, because he'd abruptly been struck by the mental image of *Jin Ling* meeting Wei Wuxian.

Oh, he hoped they could make that happen, and not just because Jin Ling's situation *sucked* and he deserved to get to be part of something awesome and magical. Wei Wuxian would take one look at Jin Ling and his prickles and adopt the kid on the spot… and Jin Ling would love every minute of it and be so utterly offended by his own reaction. The whole thing would be comedy *gold*!

In the meantime… Wen Yuan was done at last with his homework, and it belatedly occurred to him that Wei Wuxian might actually have come looking for him for a *reason*, not just to solve his schoolwork woes with sneaky teaching techniques. "Did you need something?" he asked quickly.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Need, no. Inviting," he said. And then picked up the thing that he'd left on the floor, and placed it on the table.

Wen Yuan sparkled and wasn't the least bit ashamed. Because *sword*!

"Practicing," Wei Wuxian explained as he stood, and then grinned, crooking a finger in invitation.

The meaning was obvious. *Wanna watch?*

The answer was equally obvious: *oh hell yes!*

Wen Yuan scrambled to his feet, almost upending the table in his hurry, and followed Wei Wuxian out. Wei Wuxian waved for him to stay on the veranda as the cultivator stepped down into the garden itself; Wen Yuan sat on the edge of the platform, feet dangling over the side as he eagerly watched Wei Wuxian move out into the open space that they'd used for Tai Chi… had it really been only that morning?

For a moment, Wen Yuan wondered if he should get Professor Lan – yes, he was still in a meeting with Director Lan and Aunt Qing, but surely he wouldn't want to miss this! But then, standing in the center of the space, Wei Wuxian went utterly still for a moment. Breathing.

And then he moved.

Wide-eyed, Wen Yuan watched, not even sure if he was actually breathing. Sure, he'd seen martial arts demonstrations, both in person and recorded. And he'd watched plenty of shows and movies, and even if the fighting was pretty fake in a lot of them he'd seen some really *realistic* stuff, too…

This wasn't realistic. This was *real*, in a way that he couldn't put his finger on directly but that spoke straight to his gut in a way that even martial arts tournaments didn't.

Then again… of course it felt real. Martial arts were *arts*, and most people, even the very best, didn't learn them *expecting* their lives to depend on their skills.

Wei Wuxian started slow, cycling through a series of stances and strikes that were almost meditative, even with a hard precision to them that showed that Wei Wuxian knew *exactly* where the blade would cut and thrust with every movement. A precision that stayed, even as his movements sped up. Then…

Wen Yuan nearly choked in shock at first jump, as Wei Wuxian leapt, flipped, and came down with a whirling strike that probably would have cut an opponent in two right there, and no wonder he'd wanted Wen Yuan on the veranda and out of the way, because he *kept going*, moving through the air as much as across the ground. And he didn't stay in the cleared space, either, but used the whole garden, trees and plants and everything. Which was *totally* like something out of a movie, except that this wasn't the result of choreography and camera work – he just was *that* aware of everything around him, that he could leap and slide and dart without actually damaging a single plant.

Then another impossible leap, and he landed lightly on one of the rocks out in the middle of the pond, set his hand in a mudra—

And his sword flew.

Now Wen Yuan *did* stop breathing, as the sword whirled and darted back and forth through the air over the pond, so fast that it was barely more than a shimmery silver-red trail of light. Because yeah, he'd heard about the Sword Incident with Jin Zixun and it wasn't like he hadn't already seen Wei Wuxian do impossible stuff like *walking on water*…

But this, watching a *flying sword* weaving an intricate lattice of light as Wei Wuxian stood quiet and still at the heart of the pattern… he was seeing this *with his own eyes*!

Then it came to a stop, hovering point-down next to Wei Wuxian, and…

"Can you fly on it?" he blurted.

Squeaked, rather, because his lungs were a bit shorter on air than he'd realized.

Wei Wuxian paused as he was reaching for the hilt of his sword and looked at Wen Yuan, blinking and tilting his head.

Right. Words. He could word. Definitely.

Um. "I mean… flying. Going up? On your sword?" Flushing – that sounded *so* awkward! – he added some vague gesticulations towards the air, the sword, a sort of vague hand motion that maybe could pass for one of those mudras if you squinted *really* hard.

Wei Wuxian laughed – but then he made a gesture, and his sword lowered itself down to hover, horizontal now, alongside the stone he was standing on.

Then, casual as could be, he stepped onto the flat of the blade. And stood there, one hand in the mudra, the other resting on a jauntily cocked hip, grinning at Wen Yuan.

Standing on a sword *hovering in midair*.

Wen Yuan was pretty sure he'd never, ever live down the strangled noise he made, and he didn't care. Because apparently he lived in a world where *flying on a sword was an actual thing that could happen*.

I am going to learn how to do that!

Chapter End Notes

(Look! I can actually use the Chapter Notes function this time!)

Zhou is the name for the rice porridge usually translated as congee. It just strikes me as ridiculous that we're using an English version of a Portuguese rendition of a Tamil word for "to boil" when there's a perfectly functional Chinese name for the dish…

Little screed here… one of the things that I love about animation (*good* animation, at least) is that, *because* animation is not bound to hard physics and real bodies the way live action is, animation can, ironically, make inhuman feats of strength and agility look far more realistic than live action ever can. Animated images can show impact and momentum in a way that actor safety would never allow, so that even implausible jumps and twists and landings *feel* viscerally real. Or in short… because animation doesn't have to work around the limits of a physical human body, they can make it look like that body is actually, physically doing those insane things. I'm kinesthetic by nature – I really respond to that!

Regarding language acquisition: as mentioned previously, this is really a mix of "Wei Wuxian is Just That Brilliant," *total* language immersion, and Authorial Convenience… but yes, I am justifying it in-universe with the headcanon that cultivation does, in fact, allow a sufficiently dedicated cultivator to retain or regain certain youthful traits beyond pretty faces and athleticism. (Although, for the record, the whole "only children can really learn a language" isn't quite so hard and fast a rule as most people make it out to be.)

Although, as an aside… given how fandom looooves "XYZ character has been turned into a child!" scenarios, I really want to see a story where it gets used as a standard training technique to get around certain critical learning periods…

And for those of you who've read my other MDZS fic, *Bitter Plants Bearing Sweet Fruit*… yes, the Dunhuang manuscripts are one of our best sources for information about the late disunified period through roughly the Song. They're a large archive of documents that was found in a sealed cave in one of the Mogao Cave temples. Which I did not know when I wrote that fic or I would absolutely have included it!

Chapter 9: Finding a Rhythm

Chapter Summary

After so many revelations, everyone needs a breather.

...or just to inflict the revelations on someone else. That works, too.

Chapter Notes

Writing Wei Wuxian's dialogue in this chapter was fun, but hard. He has enough of the modern language that I could start really getting his character voice in, but I didn't want to make him progress *too* rapidly when I'm cheating as it is! So I ended up working out his dialogue in my head, and then going back through to pick apart any complex grammar or advanced vocabulary he logically shouldn't know. And then I got to have fun with the fact that he's basically talking to *My Only Mode Is Erudite Formality* Lan Wangji and a teenager, and their conversations are mostly about house life, medicine, and history. Meaning he's picked up some very strange speech patterns, and his vocabulary is eclectic to say the least! (And he's also at the stage where he understands much more than he can fluently articulate.)

(Some personal experience talking here: when you're a second language learner, advanced vocabulary and common vocabulary are all functionally equally difficult. So yes, Wei Wuxian is learning words like manifest and suppression before car and hamburger, because he actually has some context for the first two!)

Wei Wuxian flopped back on the roof tiles with a relieved sigh.

Over the last several days since his realization at the Cold Springs and the subsequent confrontations and conversations, they'd come up with a rhythm of sorts to their days. Lan Wangji rose obscenely early, like a proper Lan should, and spent the early morning hours being disgustingly productive doing… something. Wei Wuxian still wasn't entirely clear about what the man's status in this strange new version of Cloud Recesses actually was, beyond the fact that he was clearly a dedicated scholar, which probably meant a respectable level of rank and wealth even with the new printing techniques that made books so much more easily available. Wen Yuan also rose relatively early – just not horrifyingly so! – and worked on his own studies until Wei Wuxian joined them for the morning meal. After which, they gathered together – usually as an excursion elsewhere, to maintain the illusion that Wei Wuxian was not living with Lan Wangji – for the language lessons.

Although those had shifted somewhat. It helped to know that he *hadn't* been imagining the similarities. In a way, he'd been right to wonder if the local language was a very distant dialect of a more familiar tongue. It *was*… just, distant in time, rather than place.

Very, *very* distant!

Wei Wuxian chuckled ruefully. Now that he'd more or less gotten the basics down, his main problem was simply *vocabulary*… and practice. So, since what he needed was lots of words in context… well, A'Yuan's books were being put to excellent use!

Crossing his hands behind his head, he closed his eyes, basking in the afternoon sun.

This, too, had become part of the daily routine. After a morning of intensive mental work, by the time the midday meal was finished all three of them were nursing headaches. So they had taken to spending the early afternoons working on physical training and meditation. Although "training" was probably an overstatement, since thus far Wei Wuxian was limiting his intervention to ensuring that Wen Yuan and Lan Wangji were properly utilizing the benefits of their intriguing moving meditation to strengthen their meridians.

Actually *training*... well. He had a few things that he wanted to be sure of before they tried to tackle that.

And once that was done, Lan Wangji often had responsibilities to attend to, and Wen Yuan more of his studies. Although Wei Wuxian strongly suspected that was less a matter of studies and far more about spending time with his disembodied voices!

Yes, he was aware that Wen Yuan was actually using his "computer" to speak to friends in distant places. But the *spluttering* every time Wei Wuxian called them "ghost voices" was far too much fun!

Eventually, of course, they would reconvene for an evening meal and then more conversation and perhaps a bit of music, until the poor early risers were yawning and ready to retire at yet another truly Lan-like hour. But for now… well, Wei Wuxian had some time to himself.

And they'd come to an agreement that the rooftop was effectively "his" space, for when he wanted to think – especially after Wen Yuan prudently decided that he would *not* be attempting any further rooftop scrambles without the aid of a ladder! And, truly, the space was welcome. Good company the other two might be, but it was rather obvious that the Jingshi was *not* intended to house three quite active people.

And… well. There was no denying that he had a great deal to think about. A *lot* had happened over the course of fifteen hundred years.

Granted, Wen Yuan's book did a very good job of laying out the developing history as a clear narrative thread. Clear enough to tell Wei Wuxian that there were *definitely* important details being glossed over; he knew a few things about pat tidy stories meant for general consumption.

And actually, it was those missing threads in the story that bothered him the most. In particular: *where were the sects*?

Not just the sects. The section of the history that had dealt with his own time went into horrifying and occasionally mind-numbing detail on the many petty wars of the various dynasties that had risen and fallen – which, well, not wrong!

But he had yet to find a single reference to the Sunshot Campaign.

Which… didn't make sense. Even if somehow knowledge of the cultivation sects had been lost… Wen Ruohan had systematically scoured the land of anyone who might even *dream* of claiming to stand above or even equal to the Wen clan, and he had made no exceptions for non-cultivators. And the subsequent war had raged across *all* the civilized lands, leaving devastation all too frequently in its wake.

And yet… no mention of it. He had recognized a handful of names in the accounts of petty wars among the mundane nobility and their generals, although he could have sworn most of those had been far too busy bowing to Wen Ruohan or demanding that the Sunshot Campaign win faster to get up to anything like that on their own time, but then again he'd been a bit preoccupied with surviving the Sunshot Campaign himself to worry about that. But… that was it.

Frankly, Wei Wuxian suspected that there had been some master historians in the subsequent dynasties who had nursed a fondness for burning inconvenient records and one hell of a grudge.

Except. Even the Qin hadn't managed to actually *destroy* everything of what had come before. Cultivation techniques were one thing – consider how much had been lost with the burning of Gusu Lan and the massacre at Lotus Pier, or the near-annihilation of the Wen after the war, for that matter. But knowledge of the very *existence* of the sects?

Shaking his head, Wei Wuxian settled back, wriggling his shoulders a bit to get more comfortable – and blinked when something pulled slightly on his upper arm, before he recalled the strange sticky fabric with gauze that Wen Qing had put there.

That was the *other* reason he was on the roof rather than exploring. They'd broken the routine up a bit today; rather than going over history, they'd joined Wen Qing for a rather in-depth discussion of how medicine had changed – and particularly, the treatment of diseases.

Which had been… well. Amazing, really. So many people died every year to seasonal illnesses and the periodic plagues that swept through the land. Even the great sects, with their healers and clean water and plentiful food, weren't immune. Yunmeng Jiang had been particularly attentive to such matters, if only because plague often followed the river trade routes. And, of course, the restless dead that disease could leave in its wake, not to mention yao that often spread or worsened illnesses.

Wei Wuxian was acutely aware that he'd been lucky as a child; he'd seen plenty of other street children struck down by disease. But while he hadn't had a golden core, his parents had taught him how to meditate and cycle power through his meridians. Just little tricks, but

enough. Enough to be a little stronger against the cold, to survive on less food, to strengthen himself against contaminated food and water, and to fight off disease.

Wen Qing, for her part, had been fascinated by that information. They'd spent the whole of the midday meal discussing the ways that cultivation could enhance one's resistance to diseases. Not to mention the level of cultivation required, how effective the techniques were on different types of illnesses, the difference between passive resistance versus generalized practices that happened to have helpful effects versus specific healing techniques, what techniques were used by the patient versus techniques used by the healer…

He'd answered… well, as well as he could. He wasn't a trained healer himself, but as head disciple the health and safety of junior disciples had been his responsibility, so he did at least know rather more than most. And he'd picked up a fair bit over the course of the war, as well.

The problem was *words*! Cultivation was hard enough to explain to non-cultivators as it was, and half of the time, Lan Wangji seemed to be struggling to find matching terms in this new language. Not to mention that medicine had clearly developed new words as well – he was still trying to sort out the distinction between *bacterial* and *viral* and another dozen terms that just didn't seem to translate.

Still. Stilted as it had been, they'd both managed to learn quite a bit…

And then she'd stabbed him with one of her needles anyway! No mercy at all!

And she'd just rolled her eyes when he'd pouted at her. Really… tragic as it was, it was probably a good thing that she and Lan Yi would never have the opportunity to join forces in terrorizing him!

He was fairly sure that she wasn't actually Lan Yi's reincarnation, at least. Or rather, he hoped she wasn't. The bond between Lan Yi and her husband… well. Those two were the sort to be reborn as husband and wife through a thousand reincarnations. They belonged together.

Granted, that didn't mean that Lan Yi's actual reincarnation wasn't out there somewhere in this much later version of the world. Now that was a scary thought!

Regardless, Wen Qing had wanted him to stay close to the others, in case he reacted badly to the "vaccine" she had given him. Which he thought was unlikely, given her explanation of how the vaccine worked, but… well, he didn't argue with healers. Especially ones with needles!

To be honest, he thought the idea of vaccines was a fascinating concept. After all, the sects would send – had sent, rather – junior disciples on relatively easy night hunts at first, sometimes even sending them against captured yao in controlled hunting grounds, specifically to build their confidence and experience before sending them out against more dangerous opponents. Vaccines, so far as he understood the concept, took the same principle of training through experience and applied it to the body's defense against illness.

And it was a good idea to send a senior along to observe even the safe night hunts; there was always, *always* a chance of something going very, very wrong. So it made sense that the doctor wanted him to stay close to the others, in case of problems.

Of course, that did raise the question of what to do with his time. He *could* pull out the history books or the poetry book and try to get a little farther, he supposed… but he hated to deprive Wen Yuan of the opportunity; the boy was so *enthusiastic* about it. He did have his own little side project he'd been working on when the boy wasn't looking… but with the change in routine, he hadn't brought his supplies with him onto the roof, and he didn't feel like climbing back down. Especially since Wen Yuan was busy with his disembodied voices (heh!) in the main room.

He could meditate, of course… but he'd already spent nearly a shichen on that, and Wen Qing had specifically asked him to refrain from actively using his cultivation until she had a better understanding of how he would react to these new healing techniques. Which meant training was also out.

Not to mention that his core still ached at unexpected moments. It *was* improving, especially now that he had been making use of the Cold Springs as part of his evening wandering, but it was definitely still *strained* in a way that he hadn't even known was possible.

Granted, given that he apparently had survived being *frozen in ice* for fifteen hundred years, coming out with a strained core was definitely getting off easy!

Still. Given that Wen Qing clearly knew very little about cultivation, and she was the only healer he'd met so far… best to be careful until he was more confident in his recovery.

He sighed, closing his eyes, and seriously contemplated just taking a nap. Although he could just imagine Jiang Cheng's complaining; *you slept for fifteen hundred years and you're* still *napping?!*

He did have to wonder how Jiang Cheng had reacted to his disappearance. For that matter, he wondered if Yunmeng Jiang had even *known* what happened to him. For his own part, he still had no actual memory of anything beyond preparing to leave the cleansed Burial Mounds – just the sense-memory of an arrow's impact and remembered annoyance echoed by the slow stirring of deeper fury within the Burial Mounds themselves. Nothing to indicate who had shot that arrow, or if they'd survived the consequences.

It was entirely possible that from the perspective of his own time, Wei Wuxian had simply… vanished.

He had to wince at that. He could imagine the mess that would have caused. Especially given the absolute *fury* Jiang Cheng had flown into when he'd declared his intent to go to the Burial Mounds.

But it had been necessary, especially when Jiang Cheng had thrown fits just as furious over Wei Wuxian fulfilling his duties.

He understood it. During the war, Jiang Cheng had coped with the loss of his core by flinging himself into the fight against the Wens. Wei Wuxian had been an extension of his will, his powers effectively Jiang Cheng's powers. But after the war, when they'd finally defeated the Wen and returned to Lotus Pier to pick up the pieces and return to peaceful, day to day life…

Well. With no common enemy to stand against, the old insecurities had come surging back, in force.

Wei Wuxian had gone to the Burial Mounds in part because if he hadn't, it would only have been a matter of time before those bitter insecurities drove a much more permanent wedge through the sect. But as the years passed and it became obvious that Wei Wuxian wouldn't return…

He knew Jiang Cheng. The thought that Wei Wuxian's absence might *not* be by choice would never even occur to him.

It was not hard at all to imagine the incandescent fury.

"Wei Wuxian?"

Startled, Wei Wuxian sat up, blinking over the edge of the roof at the man standing in the open space of the garden below. He'd thought that Lan Wangji was occupied with his own set of disembodied voices, or perhaps deep in his scholarly work – but there the man was, looking up at the roof with his usual calm expressionlessness, hands clasped patiently behind his back.

"Do you have a moment?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian grinned. And here he'd been wracking his mind for something to do! Ask and ye shall receive, apparently. "Always!" he chirped, bouncing to his feet and hopping down from the roof onto the veranda.

Stepping up onto the veranda himself, Lan Wangji tilted his head in elegant acknowledgement, and then led the way into the room that Wei Wuxian had come to think of as the man's personal study. Amused by the typical taciturn lack of explanation, Wei Wuxian followed behind him, curious.

And, well, perhaps a little eager. He'd generally stayed out of that room unless invited – as noted previously, it seemed to be Lan Wangji's personal study, and he did have *some* sense of propriety, after all!

Still. Part of him wanted to stare in awe every time he visited. There were more written documents in Lan Wangji's personal collection than he'd seen in the libraries of some sects – and not just minor ones, either!

Granted, it was obvious that books were *vastly* easier to acquire in this strange future time. All he needed for proof of that was the stack of volumes that Wen Yuan had handed him – more texts than he'd ever owned in his entire life, and that included the ones he'd written himself!

Granted, he hadn't actually written much. He held to his philosophy that *notes* didn't do anyone much good when you couldn't exactly pull them out for consultation in the middle of a fight. And his ghost path… well. He'd wanted to sort that out a bit more before he tried recording the techniques for others to try. Especially since the underlying principle was… not one that most proud young masters would take to with ease, one might say.

Not that that had ever stopped opportunists from providing *false* cultivation manuals, the better to prey on those who didn't realize that the masters of the great sects would have absolute conniptions at the thought of writing down their own cultivation techniques – even the basic ones that everyone used, let alone the specific techniques of the different clans and sects. Except for the Gusu Lan, who'd followed their founding philosophy as a sect based on the principles of a monastery, and wrote *everything* down. Including three thousand rules.

(And then never got rid of any of it. Even when the contents were proven *wrong*. Lan Yi had had some opinions about that.)

Really, just the sheer number of texts Lan Wangji had squirreled away in his home was proof that Lan Wangji was, indeed, a *Lan* Lan.

Still. The sheer *amount* of information stored away in this room was mind-boggling, and he would happily have lost himself in it, were he not still attempting to master the way writing had changed from the classical style of the old texts that he had learned as a young disciple.

Still. He couldn't help but notice that today, many of those texts were *not* on the shelves. The office wasn't *messy* by any means – he had a private suspicion that Lan Wangji was constitutionally incapable of being messy. But there were books arranged in what were clearly precisely organized stacks out on his desk, clearly there to be used.

The sight made him laugh a little internally. How many people had pictured a scene like this when it came to his creation of guidao? Well, not *exactly* like this, there definitely would have been more mess and dead bodies and almost certainly Vaguely Ominous Noises everywhere, but still a matter of ancient tomes and such. When actually, his cultivation had been born from desperate flashes of inspiration and trial and error and *not wanting to die*. And not a text in sight.

However, a large area of the desk had been set aside for a map.

Intrigued, Wei Wuxian tilted his head for a closer look. The map seemed to be made of… something very like an extraordinarily *dense* fabric, thick and sturdy enough that where one corner of it hung over the edge of the desk, it *flopped* more than draping. Although part of that might have to do with the strange, dully glossy finish on one side of it, looking like some kind of clear, flexible lacquer had been applied to it after the map itself had been painted.

And what a map! Like the one from the history book, it showed the forests and mountains and rivers and coastlines – not to mention cities! – in vivid colors, with a level of detail that was so precise that it looked *real*, like the landscape that spread out below during sword flight. Except Wei Wuxian didn't know of anyone who'd ever flown *that* high!

Although, he was also fairly certain that few cultivators would ever have used sword flight for *mapmaking*. He'd done it on occasion, during complicated night hunts, and the skill had proven exceedingly useful from time to time during the war. But most cultivators he had known would have considered such things to be beneath them; too mundane, too utilitarian, too *worldly* for noble cultivators seeking the lofty heights of immortality!

Strange how worldliness only seemed to apply to practical work, rather than silver and silks.

Wei Wuxian shook his head, chuckling – after all, the foibles of the powerful were hardly anything new! – and then blinked as Lan Wangji offered him a sheet of paper.

Accepting it, Wei Wuxian studied the contents curiously. It appeared to be a timeline, similar to the one that Lan Wangji had made after Wei Wuxian had confronted him – although this one was clearly printed, the characters too small and fine and regular for even the steadiest of hands wielding the smallest of brushes.

But *this* timeline ended with the founding of the Tang dynasty. (A name that at least meant a little more to him now than it had that day!) The year Wei Wuxian had marked, the last one that he himself remembered, was placed in the center of the line. But where that previous timeline had been all but empty save for the march of dynasty after centuries-long dynasty, every length of this much shorter timeline was bristling with notations. Not just the rise and fall of various rulers and warlords, not just great battles, but famines, storms, floods… and each one marked with *two* dates. One the odd new system with its nonsensical zero year that simply counted without regard to dynasties or rulers, and the other… ah. The other marked the date relative to Wei Wuxian's own timepoint, it seemed.

One event in particular caught his eye – because he remembered that one. A massive flood had devastated the Wei river valley near Nightless City in Qishan, devastating the region and leading to thousands of deaths as the civilian population had found themselves with nowhere to flee – and then worse, because as the waters receded, the taint of those deaths had become concentrated in the Wei river.

That shouldn't have happened. But in the aftermath of the war, the Wen sect had been too shattered to hunt *anything*, let alone deal with such a massive problem. And no other sects had stepped in to handle the region in their absence. There'd even been a frustrating sense that somehow, the flood was simply just desserts – despite the fact that the people affected hadn't even had anything to do with the war. He'd considered visiting after his work in the Burial Mounds, to see if the techniques he'd developed there might help, but… well.

Looking at the marker for the flood, however, clicked it into place. The first timeline had been broad in scale, covering the vast expanse of time that had passed while he had been absent. This one…

He looked at the second half of the line, the half that came *after* his disappearance, and then looked at Lan Wangji.

"This is what we know of the events of your time," the man said. "It is as detailed as I could make it."

Wei Wuxian blinked at him, then looked back at the timeline, positively *bristling* with events and annotations.

Was *this* what Lan Wangji had been doing all this time? Wei Wuxian had some idea of how much effort was involved in digging through old annals; he'd done it on occasion for night hunts, and then especially after the war, as he and Jiang Cheng had tried to hunt down information on the various threats that the Jiang had kept suppressed in their territories for decades and even centuries, because the last thing they needed in the wake of the war was another Xuanwu of Slaughter breaking its seals under their feet.

"…Thank you," he said, genuinely touched. The man must have put *so much work* into hunting the information down, let alone bringing it together into a concise form.

Lan Wangji pursed his lips ever so slightly as he gave at the document a flat stare, ears reddening slightly. "From what we have learned, I suspect much is incorrect, or missing," he said, as if the inadequacies of his sources was a matter of personal affront.

Wei Wuxian beamed at him. "It is a start!" he countered. "And we two can learn more from here!"

Hm. Lan Wangji's ears turned even redder at that.

The video ended, followed by silence.

A silence eventually broken by the clatter of a truly ridiculous number of phone charms hitting the table.

Nie Mingjue bit back a snicker. *How about that. He actually put the phone down.*

Then again. If anything was going to actually detach his little brother from his beloved cell phone… Well. The security camera footage of Wei Wuxian waking out of the ice would do it.

Then Nie Huaisang smacked him upside the head. "*Dage*!" he shrieked. "You couldn't have *warned me*?!"

Nie Mingjue smirked. Ooh, his brother had put some actual wrist into that, he was *ticked*. "Would you have believed me if I had?" he asked, smug and not even trying to hide it.

After all, after having lived through the whole *holy shit this is actually happening!* madness in person, he was not going to pretend he wasn't taking a cathartic amount of unholy glee in inflicting it on someone else. *Especially* his pest of a baby brother.

A baby brother who was already recovering, staring at him with big wide doe eyes. "But Dage, you signed an NDA! Are you sure it's okay to show me this?"

Nie Mingjue snorted. As if Nie Huaisang didn't know damned well that Nie Mingjue wouldn't have shown him *any* such thing without formal clearance. His brother was just fishing for information, and not even pretending to be subtle about it, either.

Granted, Nie Huaisang's wide-eyed act was actually quite effective on most people. But Nie Mingjue had practically raised his half-brother; he was not most people.

"This has to go public eventually," he said bluntly. "And Lan Qiren and his bunch don't know the first thing about publishing in anything that isn't a scientific journal. Right now the only person with any kind of social media savvy on the project that I trust is the *sixteen year old*."

And like hell he was going to put that on the kid. Not when this was going to call for quite a bit of *political* savvy as well. He was pretty sure the only person on the project with any experience in politics was *Wei Wuxian*… and he *definitely* wasn't throwing the guy into that mess of sharks when he didn't even know what a cell phone was yet.

Nie Huaisang blinked at him, looking genuinely taken aback. "I'm amazed that the news isn't everywhere already," he said. The tone *sounded* impressed… unless you knew him well enough to catch the calculating edge underneath.

Which. Well.

"*Same*," Nie Mingjue agreed, and let the flat grimness of his voice say everything else.

Because while he hadn't yet discussed it with Lan Wangji, because the man had far too much on his shoulders as it was… Lan Qiren could talk about academic integrity, research contracts and NDAs as much as he liked. The blunt fact of the matter was, they *should* have had a leak by now. Maybe some of the researchers were keeping it zipped because they thought the prestige of being on the project outweighed the potential fame of being the one who blew the whistle, but that sure as hell didn't account for everyone involved. True, they'd managed to shut Su Minshan down… but Jin Zixun? The guy was an *assistant*, he wasn't exactly going to get much in the way of fame or fortune from the project playing out. Not to mention that he'd been effectively sidelined from the project for his idiocy… and yet he *hadn't* gone whining to his rich, influential uncle?

No way had the guy spontaneously developed a sense of self-awareness. *Someone* was sitting on him to keep him quiet.

Very helpful of them. Nie Mingjue didn't trust it one damn bit. It suggested that the *someone* in question saw a personal benefit in keeping the news about Wei Wuxian quiet.

And he hadn't forgotten about the break-in attempt… or the timing. Jin Zixun threw the whole security system into chaos and *that very night* someone tried to get into the lab? No, he did not like the implications of that in the least.

Information was power… but only if you knew how to wield it. There was a reason he'd pushed so hard for a PR manager. This was one battlefield that they were all rank amateurs on.

Nie Huaisang snatched up his phone, hugging it to his chest like a tiny electronic security blanket. "But *Dage*!" he whined. "It would be *so much work*!"

Heh. He knew that tone. His little brother was already hooked – probably had been from the moment he'd seen the video. And there was no way he'd leave something like this on the head of a teenager. But he still had a persona to play. So. "That's because you're thinking about it the wrong way."

Nie Huaisang pouted at him, fingers absently playing with a five-tailed fox charm from the cluster dangling from his phone. "Oh?"

Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrows. "Think about how shocked you were by the video. Now think about getting to be the one who decides how and when to inflict that on *the entire world*."

Nie Huaisang's grin was *all teeth*.

Just one last bit of bait to dangle. Because he couldn't resist. "By the way… did I mention he can make his sword fly?"

"This really doesn't make sense, you know."

Lan Wangji looked up from Nie Mingjue's email confirming Nie Huaisang's appointment and setting up a time to introduce him to the project's leadership to find Wei Wuxian studying the map now laid out on a side table he'd added to his office.

The map itself had been a gift from Lan Xichen – half serious, half a joke. Technically it was a desk protector; a satellite photo of China printed on fabric and finished with an easily cleaned surface. An easily cleaned surface that was also easy to write on, so long as one used washable markers. It had proven very useful in his research, allowing him to note and track the practices of different regions and observe patterns of diffusion and contraction over time.

Now the map was laid out with points marking names he'd never encountered in his research: Yunmeng Jiang, Gusu Lan, Lanling Jin, Qinghe Nie, Tingshan He. He'd intended to mark border lines as well, but when he had asked, Wei Wuxian had laughed wryly.

"Borders!" he'd chuckled. "Borders were very important. Until there was a problem that no one wanted! Or maybe something someone did want."

That had been an interesting conversation. Lan Wangji had not realized how deeply embedded the concept of borders as clearly drawn lines upon a map denoting sovereign territories was in his mind… or how *new* the concept actually was. Intellectually he knew that historically borders tended to be much fuzzier in practice – more a matter of spheres of influence, only becoming clearly defined when there was a dispute or history of conflict. But knowing such things on an intellectual level was rather different from Wei Wuxian's wry humor about the matter.

At the moment, however, Wei Wuxian was studying the map with pursed lips, the photocopy of the ancient census report he'd been reading set aside.

“There is no writing of the clans and sects? I can understand.” He chuckled. “Angry historians can be dangerous!” With a frustrated huff, he planted his hands on his hips and shook his head. “But the Sunshot Campaign was *big*. Cultivators, farmers, merchants. It affected everyone. People would talk!”

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. They had spent nearly two days now trying to track down some sort of record of the great war between the cultivation sects – a war that had raged across the entire heartland of the Middle Kingdom that he’d never heard of, in any of the ancient records. Wei Wuxian was right, the gap was *strange*. Even if the historians in the courts of the various dynasties had for some reason attempted to erase that part of history… Lan Wangji studied folklore. There should have been songs. Legends. Folk tales, beyond lore centered around lone sages like the Yiling Laozu legend. *Something* to reflect a conflict so massive that the greater part of the country had united in alliance against a single would-be conqueror.

Given that the period was called the Age of Disunity in some academic circles for a *reason*, Lan Wangji had to wonder how that alliance had ever managed to come about.

Wei Wuxian chuckled when he asked. “Because the sects had to help. They owed us – Yunmeng Jiang. Or rather, Jiang Cheng and me.”

Jiang Cheng. Or rather Jiang Wanyin, heir and then leader of the Yunmeng Jiang. Someone Wei Wuxian had been very close to, given that despite his rank Wei Wuxian still referred to him by his personal name. “They owed you?” he asked, probing slightly. Wei Wuxian had referenced his own role in the war on occasion, but only very briefly, the occasional passing comment on his presence or absence during certain events. This was the first time he had ever mentioned playing a role at the start of the war.

The man nodded. “We saved the heirs of… many clans. But Jin and Nie, in particular. And many disciples. That was a big thing!”

Lan Wangji waited attentively. After a moment, Wei Wuxian chuckled and turned away from the map to face him properly, leaning his hip against the table as he settled into what Lan Wangji had come to recognize as his storytelling mode.

“Ah. Where to start?” Wei Wuxian paused – likely sifting through his available vocabulary for the best words – and then began. “The Wen… asked? Required?… all sects to send heirs and disciples to them. For ‘training.’” To Lan Wangji’s intense amusement, the man actually wiggled his fingers in air quotes at the word, a gesture he’d picked up from Wen Yuan.

It did seem to be an accurate application, in this case. “Hostages,” Lan Wangji surmised, not particularly surprised. The lives of the heirs as an ultimate threat, with additional disciples who could be killed to send a warning as needed.

Wei Wuxian cocked his head to the side; that term had yet to come up in their conversations, after all. Once Lan Wangji explained it – a process they’d refined to practically a science over the weeks – he snorted. “That. They just did not say the words! But that. They took our swords, made us study Wen texts, made us follow Wen Chao – Wen Ruohan’s second son,” he added in clarification, lip curling in obvious disdain. “Wen Ruohan’s *stupid* son.”

Ah. So a combination of hostages and an attempt to indoctrinate the heirs of the various clans into servitude towards the Wen. “What happened?”

Wei Wuxian huffed. “Wen Chao ordered his guards to hurt one disciple to…hm. Make the thing he was looking for come out. Jin Zixuan – the Jin heir – he refused. Wen Chao ordered his guards to kill Jin Zixuan.” Unexpectedly, he smirked. “Wen Chao was distracted. His guards were distracted. I… teased?… him to attack me. I took his sword and made Wen Chao *my* hostage.”

Lan Wangji felt his breath catch, picturing the desperate chaos of the events in those simple, stilted phrases. “That was… very dangerous. Why did you risk it?”

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian blinked at him, then shrugged. “The danger was already *there*. Wen Chao was stupid. He was not *that* stupid. Jin Zixuan was the Jin *heir*. You do not kill an important hostage! If you do, then you do not care what will happen. If you do, you have *already* decided there will be a war.” He shook his head. “That meant Jiang Cheng *was not safe*. I was to be protecting him. I needed to get him safe. So! I made Wen Chao my hostage.” His lips quirked. “It *almost* worked…”

Lan Wangji exhaled slowly. He could see the strategic merit, yes. If war was inevitable anyway, then the only thing cooperating with the Wens’ demands would accomplish would be to weaken the other sects by leaving their heirs and disciples in enemy hands. Fighting back would have given them the chance to escape to safety, and potentially put a valuable hostage in their own hands.

That *almost*, however, was ominous. “What happened?”

Wei Wuxian chuckled ruefully. “A monster was there. The Xuanwu of… Killing? We were standing on it!” He shook his head. “I did not expect that. It was a problem!”

Lan Wangji blinked. He… couldn’t have heard that correctly. He was certainly *familiar* with the mythological Xuanwu, of course, but… surely this was a case of linguistic drift? Or perhaps the figurative application of a mythological term to a mundane creature? “I have heard that a Xuanwu is a divine creature that protects the north,” he said carefully. “It is usually depicted… it is supposed to look like a tortoise and a snake.”

He expected the man to laugh and correct him. Instead, Wei Wuxian simply hummed and *nodded*. “That is close,” he agreed nonchalantly. “But this one was… wrong. Not divine. It had killed many people. Then it disappeared. I was surprised to learn that I was standing on it!”

“…That is an understandable miscalculation,” Lan Wangji said, grateful that his voice came out level and calm, and not as shaken as he actually felt. A part of him desperately, *fervently* wanted to believe that this was Wei Wuxian’s puckish sense of humor pulling his leg…

But the man simply nodded and continued. “Wen Chao and his men escaped. But they blocked the way out. We were stuck inside. But! Jiang Cheng and I, we found a way out in the water. Jiang Cheng led everyone out, I… made it slow?”

“You stalled it.” *How?!* And…

“That!” Wei Wuxian flourished his hands. “So! Jiang Cheng and I saved the sect heirs. They owed us. When Lotus Pier fell, Jiang Cheng used the debt to make them make the alliance.”

That… did explain a great deal, yes. That would have been a *substantial* debt.

Lan Wangji’s mind was stuck on a different detail, though. “How did *you* escape?”

“Ah.” Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly. “I fought very hard and I was very lucky. I was able to…” He pursed his lips for a moment. “Able to do *enough*. Hurt enough. Annoyed enough. Did not die enough! That made it… not want to stay.” He tilted his head. “I do not know if I killed it. It was gone. I was… not okay enough to care where.”

There was… a *great* deal to unpack in that story. It did explain something Lan Wangji had wondered about – how the heir of a sect that had already fallen had managed to become a pivotal figure in the war. There was surely more to the story; he doubted such a debt would have held much power in the face of political inconvenience for long without additional factors to tip the scales. But…

“Were such creatures common?” he asked, feeling strangely numb.

To his relief, Wei Wuxian laughed. “Oh no, not common! I thought the Xuanwu was just a story! And then it tried to eat me.”

Ah. That was… somewhat comforting. He was not sure he liked the thought of such creatures existing outside of escapist fiction and action movies.

And yet. It *had* existed. And while Wei Wuxian admitted that he had believed that it was a story, the *way* he said that… “I have never heard of any such creature existing in reality,” he said slowly. “In any form.”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head, artlessly curious. “*Any* form?” he echoed. “Are there no yao? Mo? Gui?”

It was unsettling to realize that if Wei Wuxian had asked that same question less than an hour ago, Lan Wangji would have simply assumed he was speaking from an older view of how the world worked, might perhaps have taken the question as an opportunity to discuss how changes in the paradigm with which disease and natural disasters were understood meant that people no longer explained such things in terms of monsters and demons and angry ghosts. But knowing that he was speaking to someone who had *encountered and fought* such a creature…

“They are… folklore,” he said at last. “Legends and stories. Those who believe in them today are considered… superstitious. That is, prone to believing unlikely things.”

Eyebrows raised, Wei Wuxian tapped his lower lip thoughtfully as he considered that.

It was a gesture that Lan Wangji loved and loathed at one and the same time. It was… *distracting*.

Then again, everything about the man was *distracting* on some level. Which was neither Wei Wuxian's doing, nor his responsibility.

Then bright grey eyes turned to Lan Wangji with unexpectedly sharp interest. "And cultivators?" the man asked. "Are we also *unlikely things*?"

"Cultivators and cultivation are considered… fantasy. Wish fulfillment," he added, not even certain if the *concept* of fantasy as the modern world knew it had a matching concept in Wei Wuxian's time.

It felt strangely embarrassing to say such things out loud to a *living cultivator*. At least they had not yet attempted to delve into that xianxia novel!

"Hm." Wei Wuxian tilted his head, studying him thoughtfully. "And what does Lan Wangji think?"

For a moment, Lan Wangji fought the urge to bristle, a reflex borne from *far* too many "conversations" spent defending his research interests from his brother's prying and his uncle's disdain. Coming from Wei Wuxian, in light of the conversation to this point, it was a perfectly reasonable question to ask.

Then, abruptly, he felt a sudden sense of shame for his response. Had he not been asking prying questions of his own, all this time, without telling Wei Wuxian anything about himself? At first, he had had the excuse of avoiding the problem of Wei Wuxian's dislocation in time – if he could justifiably call that an excuse. But now…

He had reflexively been trying to conduct himself with professional detachment. But as a result, he had created a very one-sided relationship between them. And that was… neither fair, nor right.

So… considering the question, he answered as honestly as he could. "I believed that as well. But it is obvious now that I was incorrect."

Wei Wuxian chuckled, grinning mischievously, and Lan Wangji belatedly recalled that the man had, in fact, seen Lan Wangji's reactions to cultivation in use. He *knew* that they'd had known very little about cultivation. So there really was no point in making some foolish attempt to play cool on the matter; that ship had sailed long ago. No matter what Lan Wangji's ego felt about the matter.

The conversation did feel… strange. Lan Wangji knew himself; he had never particularly enjoyed the parry and thrust of academic conversation as a student. He had always preferred the quiet, solitary path of research in old texts, articulating his thoughts in meticulous words laying out carefully crafted arguments to be presented to his peers as journal articles.

But… he found that this time, he *wanted* the conversation to continue. So… slowly, he added, "It seems strange to me. I do not understand how cultivation as an art would have been lost."

Wei Wuxian nodded. "It is very strange!" he agreed, hooking the spare chair Lan Wangji had brought for him and pulling it over to sit; he had adapted easily to Western-style furniture,

although to Lan Wangji's mixed despair and amusement, he'd also picked up the habit of sitting backwards rather than with proper posture. Crossing his arms on the back, he added thoughtfully, "But stranger… there are no fierce corpses? No yao? No gui? Where are those?"

A very good question. One that Lan Wangji was not sure he wanted to contemplate too closely. "Perhaps they no longer manifest here?" he suggested uneasily.

Manifest took a moment of explanation. Once clarified, however, Wei Wuxian simply raised an amused eyebrow. "Does no one die now?" he asked dryly.

Not the same way, Lan Wangji almost said. *Not of violence. Not of plagues. Not of starvation.*

Except that he knew that wasn't true. Epidemics and starvation and simple misadventure might be *less* commonplace now, but that only made them more shocking when they did strike… and the Great Leap Forward and its devastating consequences was not that long ago, either. As for violence… Well. What had happened to his own parents was proof enough that it could and did happen.

"Could something be preventing them from manifesting?" he wondered aloud. "So that they cannot appear now?"

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian blanched. "Oh, that is a scary thought," he said with feeling. "I hope that it is not so. That would be not good."

An unexpected reaction. "Is suppression not one of the ways such things are handled?" Lan Wangji asked, glad that nothing in his bearing would betray that his question was based on fiction rather than scholarship.

"Suppression…?" Before Lan Wangji could respond, Wei Wuxian sketched a quick character in the air with his finger, then nodded with a soft, "ah," apparently having puzzled out the meaning from context and what he had pieced together of sound changes over time. "Yes, it is. Ah… it was? But suppression does not let go or destroy. What you have suppressed, it is still *there*." He smiled crookedly. "And suppression ends. Always. Suppression over *all* the known lands?" He widened his eyes dramatically, a look of comic shock to accompany it. "Yikes!"

And that was another Wen Yuan-ism skillfully deployed, Lan Wangji noted with amusement, before returning to the question at hand. "It would have been a massive undertaking. And one that would have had to be maintained actively."

And he had to assume such a project should have generated records.

Granted, every single dynasty throughout all of recorded history had records boasting of the suppression of evil and chaos and the restoration of order, and the performance of proper rituals. Sorting out which claims were performative and which spoke of actual, efficacious practices would be… daunting. Especially because it was possible, even likely, that certain practices would have continued on a purely ritual basis even after their initial purpose had been forgotten.

Still. There might be something to find. He doubted any scholars had analyzed such practices on the assumption that the monsters and demons in question *actually existed*.

On the other hand… given that calm lands were historically taken as a sign that the Mandate of Heaven was secure, dynasties would have had cause to downplay the appearance of monsters. It was entirely possible that the suppression in question was of *records* of monsters, not the monsters themselves.

Although. He had to assume people would *notice* corpses getting up and walking around. To say nothing of a *man-eating snake-tortoise* so big that someone could stand on it *without realizing what they were standing on*.

Wei Wuxian rested his chin on the hands lying crossed over the back of the chair. "I wonder… Gusu Lan kept… Books, scrolls…" He freed one hand to wave vaguely in the direction of the shelves. "They let people come, sometimes."

"A library?" A moment later, Lan Wangji wondered why that seemed such a surprise. Cloud Recesses had been dedicated to learning in various forms from the beginning of their existing records. Was it so shocking that the original clan had followed similar principles?

Although… the original Cloud Recesses that Lan Wangji had read about had been established as a Buddhist monastery. But while Lan Wangji could picture a monastery keeping records dealing with the suppression of evil and spiritual disorder – particularly in the early years of the Sui and Tang dynasties, when rulers frequently invoked Buddhas and bodhisattvas as means to legitimate their reigns – the passing references Wei Wuxian had made to the Gusu Lan had seemed more secular in nature. A powerful hereditary clan, rather than a spiritual community. "Would the library have kept cultivation records?"

Wei Wuxian… blinked. "Ah. I did not say? The Gusu Lan were a cultivator clan."

…

Oh.

Oh.

Wei Wuxian smiled sheepishly as the silence stretched out. "The Gusu Lan were very proud of… studying? Records. Learning." He grinned suddenly. "Lan Yi would have loved *you*."

Lan Wangji swallowed, still feeling dazed. He was, perhaps, approaching his limit of how many times his view of the world could be upended in a single day. A single *hour*. "Lan Yi?" he asked.

"The *zongzhu* of the Lan." Wei Wuxian chuckled affectionately. "She was a friend. And very scary!"

A very good friend, by that smile.

Lan Wangji shook his head slightly. That the Lan had been led by a woman… well. Historically, it was not impossible. There had been many powerful women throughout

history, and Wu Zetian's reign as Empress had been preceded by a number of female rebel leaders proving that men would, in fact, accept a strong woman's leadership independent of a husband's backing. But it was striking, given the history of conservatism at Cloud Recesses. Although, to be fair, it was likely that the pendulum of that trend had swung widely over the centuries.

He was also uncomfortably aware that he was, in the back of his mind, drinking vinegar over a woman who had been dead for *fifteen hundred years*. Regarding a man he had no right to be thinking of in such a way!

Fortunately, Wei Wuxian did not seem to have noticed his… lapse of rationality. "The… library? It burned before the war started. But the Gusu Lan saved many documents, and Lan Yi said they would bring back what was."

"Did she succeed?" Lan Wangji asked. After all, *something* must have happened to lead the known records to claim that Cloud Recesses had been founded during the Tang. If it had been destroyed during the final decades before the rise of the Sui… perhaps that would account for the discrepancy.

Wei Wuxian hummed, resting his chin on his hands again. "The Lan went back, after the war. But building again? I don't know." His lips quirked in a small smile, soft and sad. "I did not get a chance to visit again."

Lan Wangji had to look away from that smile for a moment. Then he straightened his shoulders. "Cloud Recesses today is dedicated to the study of our past."

Wei Wuxian tilted his head and blinked, back to bright-eyed curiosity again. "Ah! Is that why I am here, then?" he asked, and grinned toothily. "After all, I am very old!"

Strange to hear it stated so baldly, for all that he was correct. Oddly uncomfortable, Lan Wangji stubbornly forged on without answering, not wanting to get sidetracked. "Officially, our records go back to the Tang dynasty… but we may not have read them correctly. Obviously there is much that is missing. Or possibly misunderstood. Perhaps we should visit the archives."

Wei Wuxian straightened eagerly, eyes *sparkling*. "I would like that!"

There. That was a much better expression for him. "I will make arrangements."

Nie Huaisang scrolled through the comments on one of his social media accounts and very deliberately did *not* cackle at the various expressions of academic dubiousness arrayed around the table.

It wasn't exactly an unusual reaction, after all. He was well aware that he was not, in any way, shape or form, what people expected when someone said "Nie Mingjue's brother."

Which just went to show that people, even accomplished Serious Scholars like this bunch, could be idiots. He'd figured out by the time he was six that there was no way *anyone*, let

alone him, could out-Dage *Dage*. So why stress himself out over it? He admired his brother, he didn't want to *be* him!

So he'd be *Huaisang* instead. And enjoy it to the hilt.

Still scrolling, he watched Lan Qiren's rapidly purpling face closely out of the corner of his eye. That one was definitely the weak link of this group. He'd crack first.

And three, two…

With an easy flick of the wrist, he turned off the screen and lowered his phone. "First things first," he said briskly. "Lan Xichen needs to be taken off the project immediately."

Mouth already open to begin shouting, Lan Qiren spluttered, his train of thought completely derailed. The others…

Well, Dage just looked resigned to amusement; *Nie Mingjue* had known what he was getting into with Nie Huaisang, after all. Lan Xichen was blinking, obviously caught off guard by finding himself suddenly the topic of conversation. On the other side of the table, Doctor Wen's eyebrows had shot up for a moment, followed by a cool, assessing sort of stare. And Lan Wangji…

Okay, he was impressed. That was one hell of a poker face. Or maybe his screen had just frozen. Really, bringing in one of the most important players over video chat? Yes, yes, quarantine, he got that, but really!

Still, he *really* needed to do something nice for Dage. The biggest bombshell *ever* ready and waiting to drop on an unsuspecting world, and on top of that a colorful cast of characters to play with – and he hadn't even met the man of the moment yet!

Granted, he'd been following the Yiling Laozu story from the start. The stunning visuals! The heart-wrenching pathos! The bombastic international cat fights over jurisdiction! The fandom! The protests! The *drama*!

Not to mention that absolute *storm* of wild conspiracy theories swirling around and around and feeding on each other at every turn. At least one of which had turned out to be *true*. He could *hear* the minds being blown across the entire internet already.

Seriously, it wasn't even his birthday!

Although he did have to admit, dealing with Lan Qiren would not have been his first choice. He'd systematically flunked his way out of the academy for a reason, thank you.

"I've already stepped back from my role as project manager," Lan Xichen said, as Lan Qiren continued to fume, at a loss for words.

Nie Huaisang shook his head. "That's not going to be enough," he said. A little regretfully; he liked Lan Xichen, after all, since they'd met a few times through Nie Mingjue's social circles. Lan Xichen was a genuinely nice guy. The problem was that *nice* had dug a hole for the project that it was going to take some fast social footwork to dodge.

“He is a senior member of this project!” Lan Qiren snapped. “You are here as an *advisor* – do not presume to overstep yourself!”

Nie Huaisang held his phone up to his nose, which conveniently hid his smirk as he widened his eyes guilelessly. “*You’re* the ones who asked my advice about going public with your results,” he protested. “I’m advising!”

Then, deliberately, he arched a knowing eyebrow.

“And here’s my advice: Yiling Laozu is *already* a famous figure, and your project was controversial to begin with in the eyes of the public. When word gets out that he’s alive? That’s going to make headlines around the world. The amount of attention on the project is going to explode *exponentially*. *Everyone* is going to want in on the action. And that means the project will be under a microscope, with the sharks ready to strike at the first weakness they smell. And believe me, there’s *plenty* for them to choose from.” Slowly, he raised his other eyebrow and lowered his phone again so that they got the full effect of his unimpressed look. “I can spin a story that covers most of it – a dramatic unexpected awakening, the project scrambling to adapt, it’s the sort of narrative people eat up, and a few fumbles along the way will help sell it. Especially because it lets me set up some heroes!”

“*But*, that means getting on top of the worst parts first,” Nie Mingjue said, a humorless quirk to his lips. He’d been military, after all. He’d learned a few things about saving face after a SNAFU.

Lan Xichen smiled ruefully. “And the biggest mistake happened under my watch and my authority. I suppose, if we want to demonstrate to the world that we are taking the Yiling Laozu situation seriously, it would not look good for me to remain on the project in any sort of decision-making role… or at all, really.”

“You cannot simply—!”

Nie Huaisang blinked. “Director Lan, removing Lan Xichen is the bare *minimum* of action you can get away with. Really, if we were going to do this properly, *you* should step down as well, since it happened under your leadership. But changing the director of the project, making the position look unstable? That sort of vulnerability would be blood in the water to all those sharks.” He waved his free hand, the thumb of the other scrolling through the feeds again. Ooh, the protesters were arranging a cookout! He should definitely drop in for that. If Nie Mingjue’s hunch was correct, that was one of the most volatile parts of the whole situation. Best to pop in and take the pulse. And the menu looked *fantastic*. “Fortunately, you weren’t directly involved in those decisions,” he continued, not missing a beat. “So we can downplay your part; emphasize it happened behind your back, you were not aware, etcetera. Not a *good* look for you, but we can manage. It does help that Jin Zixun has been pulled off active involvement as well.”

“He is correct,” Lan Wangji said stiffly. “That was a violation of ethical and moral standards of conduct, on multiple levels. Willful ignorance is no excuse. That Lan Xichen alone is facing consequences will be hard enough to explain.” Oh, the screen wasn’t frozen. Apparently Lan Wangji’s face was just Like That.

Nie Huaisang huffed. The man was right, after all. By all rights, Yao Yingjie and Jin Zixun should have been out on their ears the day it happened, not just thoroughly sidelined. But unfortunately, they'd *technically* been acting within the authority granted by Lan Xichen, since Jin Zixun had been stopped before he could actually leave the building.

Plus, Dage was right. The fact that there hadn't been an extremely public online temper tantrum from that direction yet was *fishy*.

And annoyingly convenient, if you had a certain suspicious turn of mind. Throw Jin Zixun out, and whoever was backing him would move – not to mention that aforementioned temper tantrum would blow everything wide open. Keep him on, and they would open themselves up to accusations of mismanagement by would-be meddlers… including, very likely, the one behind him.

Really, on a professional level, he was impressed. It was a very good setup. Derailing it was going to be a challenge!

However. Another part of him was raising mental eyebrows with interest. Because *oh ho*. That was not just offended ethical sensibilities speaking. Could it be that Lan Wangji was feeling *protective*? He had not seen that one coming!

Although he probably should have, stony lack of expression or no. Nie Mingjue hadn't *told* him where they'd stashed Wei Wuxian after breaking him out of the lab (and he couldn't *believe* Dage had let him miss out on that!), but it wasn't like there were all that many options.

He was so, so very tempted to just show up and see what they did… but no. Wei Wuxian had sharp pointy things. And with Lan Wangji's resting murder face, well, no one would ever know if his garden had some extra fertilizer added. No, he'd do what he did best and just pout and wheedle his way to an invitation! He would save the uninvited visit option in case people got obstinate about it – or in case he needed to make a point.

"You could shift over to the record-keeping side of things," Nie Mingjue suggested to Lan Xichen. "Heavens know *someone* needs to stay on that. Misfiled paperwork has brought down more than one operation. And we don't exactly have a surplus of people who know about Wei Wuxian to work on it."

Lan Xichen's lips quirked. "Letting me assist the project still, but removing me from any decision-making authority. Would that be enough of a demotion to satisfy our needs, Nie Huaisang?"

Eh… not ideal, but he could probably spin it. "It'll do, so long as you *actually* stay out of the management of the project from here on. Which brings me to the next point." He looked at Lan Qiren again. "You really need to get an official public release schedule on the books *yesterday*."

Wen Qing tilted her head, one eyebrow quirking up. "I thought that was what we hired you for?"

He blinked at her and waved a hand. “Well, yes. And I’ll help. But I’m *also* telling you that whenever this goes public, the very first thing the world is going to ask will be *why didn’t you notify everyone immediately?!*, and you’re going to come off much better if you can say that you decided to make the announcement on *this* timeline for *these* reasons. We don’t have to get into specifics on *when* you made the decision.”

Especially because there was no way that they were actually going to get away with making the announcement on their own timetable. *Something* was going to blow. They’d come off better if they could say that there *had* been a plan.

And on that note. “Lastly,” he said, and looked at Lan Wangji. “Whatever plan we come up with, our odds of selling it are going to be a lot better if we have Wei Wuxian’s buy-in. So really, going forward, once the doctor clears it? He really ought to be in these meetings!”

Because *really*. All this plotting and the man playing the starring role wasn’t in on it? That was asking for trouble, and not the fun type!

Hm. An interesting set of reactions to that one. Not from Lan Wangji; that man had a face about as expressive as a jade statue. But Nie Mingjue and Wen Qing both blinked and glanced at each other, and he definitely caught a bit of sheepishness on his brother’s face.

Lan Qiren huffed. “I was led to believe that Wei Wuxian was not in a position to legally consent to anything,” he grumbled, and ooh, someone was apparently still bitter about being called out.

Wen Qing did not roll her eyes and there was no hint of exasperation in her tone, but she somehow managed to radiate a sense of *you know better than that*. Nie Huaisang was impressed. “Consenting to invasive testing and the use of his possessions by people who have extensive control over everything he does is *not* the same thing as having a seat at the table for decisions that will directly affect *him* more than anyone else,” she replied briskly. “He’s right. Wei Wuxian has the right to be part of the planning for how we reveal him to the modern world. At this point, I think he has enough language and context to participate—”

“Although, about that,” Nie Huaisang mused, tapping his phone against his cheek. “I understand you’re introducing him to history, the march of technology, that sort of thing, which is all well and good – but has anyone explained anything about modern culture? Cell phones? Politics? Social media? *Fandom*?”

Lan Wangji’s eyebrows twitched downward, an infinitesimal shift. Next to him, Lan Qiren scoffed. “Such things are hardly important.”

Nie Huaisang gaped at him. “Not important?” He flapped his hands in the air. “When word of this gets out, he’s going to be a *celebrity*!”

“He’s right,” Nie Mingjue said – ah, he knew that he could count on Dage! “Wei Wuxian needs to learn how to *navigate* modern culture, not just understand it. And like it or not, he’s going to be the living heart of an absolute media storm. He’ll need to understand what that means if he’s going to weather it… and *we’ll* be judged based on that.”

Lan Qiren still looked dubious, but at least not actively dismissive of the very concept anymore. Which meant it was time to shift the conversation so he could convince himself it had been his idea from the start… and maybe massage his ego a bit. “Going back to what we were talking about before, though, you really should make sure Wei Wuxian understands at least the concept of the project!” he said brightly. “I mean, possession is nine-tenths and all that, but your position will be a lot easier to defend if Wei Wuxian understands what the project *is*. You really still can’t ask for *consent*, but at least someone should officially explain the situation.”

Then he waited to see if they would follow that where he wanted them to. They *should*, this was a smart bunch, but blind spots were blind spots and it was always good to figure out how much hand-holding a project would take in the early stages.

“Lan Wangji can—” Lan Qiren began, which was pretty much as he’d expected.

The man in question shook his head, and how he managed to make *that* look cool and elegant and distant, Nie Huaisang was not sure. Truly a man of many talents! “It should not be me,” he said.

“It should not be any of us currently involved in Wei Wuxian’s care and support,” Wen Qing corrected. “We need to draw a clear distinction between the research interests of the project and Wei Wuxian’s support network. We don’t want him to get the impression that our help has strings attached, or that he’s obligated to cooperate.”

Nie Huaisang didn’t snort – after all, this was going in the right direction and there was no point getting off-track! But he did deliberately hold his phone up at a convenient angle to hide his expression as he checked a newsfeed and tippity-typed a few notes. Because by all accounts, Wei Wuxian was not *stupid*, and he came from a time when the cutthroat nature of politics had been much more literal, and vastly more complicated. He wouldn’t be so naïve as to think that there wouldn’t be strings. There were *always* strings. That was the nature of the game.

They just didn’t want him to assume the *wrong* strings – and, more importantly, anything that even hinted at coercion would definitely be something that could be used to rally public opinion against the project and create openings for opportunistic types to swoop in and take over with claims of benevolent intervention. So the point stood.

“You are the project director, sir,” Nie Mingjue said. “If we’re going to be official about this – and I think we should – then the explanation of the project should come from you.”

Lan Qiren huffed, but from the way he’d settled back in his chair, stroking his beard, the appeal to his seniority in the project pleased him. “I suppose it is more than high time that I introduce myself to the man, as well, now that he has had the opportunity to settle somewhat,” he said, and glanced at Wen Qing. “Presuming that it can be done without violating the quarantine policy?”

Excellent. This would go much more smoothly if they could get Lan Qiren engaged in the process, rather than grumbling from afar. And it did help that this approach definitely played to the man’s authority. Although from the hint of tightness in Wen Qing’s expression, and the

way Lan Wangji seemed to become even *more* of an iceberg, if that was even possible, those two would be keeping a very close eye on that conversation.

Probably for the best. Lan Qiren had a reputation for brow-beating even when he didn't want something from someone. Still. There were going to be *lots* of people wanting things from Wei Wuxian. They might as well see how he handled it now in controlled circumstances rather than waiting for the vultures to start circling.

Wen Qing drummed her fingers on the table, considering. "I've started him on the first round of vaccines, and he's responded well so far," she said. "I'd rather wait a bit before starting the next round, however, just to be sure. But once that's done, he should at least be covered against some of the worst illnesses, the ones we don't think about because we're immunized as children." She pursed her lips. "Better news, he seems to be right that his cultivation really does enhance his immune system – and it seems to *enhance*, rather than supplant."

Nie Huaisang didn't even try to hide the way he perked up with interest. Because he had *all the questions*! And while Nie Mingjue had given him a pretty thorough review of the circumstances of the project, he'd been annoyingly close-mouthed about Wei Wuxian himself, and especially the *whole cultivator thing*!

Other than that dropped tidbit about a *flying sword*. Nie Huaisang knew a taunt when one was dangled in front of his nose!

After all, it was what *he* would have done. In fact, he had *plans* on that front.

Still! It was the *principle* of it! How could Dage *do* this to him!

"I still don't want Wei Wuxian exposed to large groups or younger children yet; the risk of exposure is still too high," Wen Qing continued. "And I'd recommend against meeting in an enclosed space." She nodded at the conference room screen, indicating Lan Wangji on his video call. "But I do think he's ready to begin meeting people beyond the tight quarantine controls. So long as it's on his terms and with his consent."

Nie Huaisang snapped mental fingers in disappointment. Given that his own role was going to involve quite a bit of crowd-working, he should probably put off the wheedling for an introduction. Drat.

"Regarding that," Lan Wangji said unexpectedly. "Wei Wuxian has expressed interest in learning what happened after the events he recalls of his time. I have been assisting him, but there are discrepancies in the historical accounts. If possible, I would like to show him the Cloud Recesses archives."

Nie Huaisang didn't squeak. But he did cackle internally. Oh, this whole thing just kept getting better! Not just the impossible magic survivor from the ancient past, but a mole in the ranks of the project and now possibly an ancient conspiracy to hide the truth of the past? It sounded like the pitch for a movie!

Really, the hardest part of all this was going to be convincing people that this *wasn't* a hoax!

Lan Xichen smiled. “Perhaps you should give him a tour of the museum while you are at it? I imagine he would find it fascinating.”

Lan Wangji didn’t *hesitate*, exactly, but there was an edge of a pause before he said, “I do not think that would be appropriate.”

Nie Huaisang waved his phone. “I think it sounds like a *great* idea!” he countered, deliberately cheerful.

Lan Wangji looked at him flatly. “Seeing the things of his time on display as curiosities…”

Nie Huaisang shrugged. “It’s not like it’s not going to happen eventually. He already knows that to us, he’s from the distant past. No point in trying to protect him from reality, not when he’s going to *be* the curiosity on display once the press gets wind of him!” He grinned, deliberately poking. “So go take him to the museum. You can call it a date!”

OMAKE:

WWX: beaming smile! We can work on this very time-intensive project you are personally invested in together!
LWJ: LanWangji.exe has ceased to function…

NOTES:

Nie Huaisang is much more the slacking troublemaker of the Cloud Recesses lectures here than the professional Headshaker of the present-day timeline of canon, since he has no murderous San-ge to throw off his tracks and thus no life-or-death impetus to make himself look incompetent and harmless…

This chapter also pretty much sums up my take on Wei Wuxian’s actions against Wen Chao in the Xuanwu’s cave: they are at the “indoctrination” primarily as *hostages*. But if Wen Chao is willing to casually order some of them – especially Jin Zixuan, heir of a sect that the Wen hadn’t already gone after – killed? Then first of all, no amount of obeisance is going to keep them safe, and second, war is *already being waged*, even if there aren’t any armies marching yet. Taking Wen Chao hostage was the strategically smart move: it nullifies the guards, including Wen Zhuliu, and gets them a valuable hostage of their own. If the Xuanwu had shown up just a minute later, the other disciples would have been armed with swords taken from their captors – which wouldn’t have helped so much against the Xuanwu, but against just about anything else, it would have! And they’re isolated from the main enemy camp, making this their best chance to escape. And *it would have worked*, if not for the whole “legendary monster literally underfoot” problem. Which, y’know, understandable that he didn’t see that coming. In fact, it *still* worked: they survived and they escaped to warn their

home sects. Unfortunately, rather than preparing, Jiang Fengmian opted to pursue diplomacy when that ship had already sailed.

As for the debt… some people have suggested that every single survivor of the Xuanwu's cave would arguably have owed life debts to Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, and yet it never comes up. Granted, conveniently ignoring debts unless forced otherwise is definitely part of the banality of evil in the MDZS setting… but it did occur to me that it might also explain how Jiang Cheng was cast in a pivotal role from the start of the Sunshot Campaign, despite technically being in an extremely weak position, so I decided to use that headcanon here.

I read a theory at one point that Wei Wuxian was basically low-key training his cultivation on the streets simply because he knew just enough to strengthen himself against cold and hunger and toxins… and as a result was using qi *constantly*. It seemed like a neat idea!

Contrary to popular fanon, I don't recall anything that indicates Wei Wuxian is in the habit of ignoring medical advice. To my recollection, he only actively rejects medical help in the Xuanwu's cave – and that's a matter of how to use limited resources, not ignoring it – and with regards to the curse mark he transferred to himself from Jin Ling. Which, as he notes, is perfectly within his ability to handle *and he is right*. Volunteering his core is something else entirely. And while people may argue about what Lan Wangji really meant by "come to Gusu," there's no denying that Lan Wangji *never* framed that as *medical treatment*. I think the fanon comes mostly out of "Wei Wuxian doesn't let people help him!" more generally… which also isn't true to what happens in canon – he's never *offered* help, except by Wen Ning. Again: no matter how you choose to interpret Lan Wangji's "come to Gusu" insistence, he never frames that as help, nor denies Wei Wuxian's assumption that the intent is punitive. Despite the fact that Wei Wuxian flat out says as much *every time it comes up*, at least that we see.

On a related note: Wei Wuxian drinking excessively and blowing off responsibilities after the war is specific to CQL. In the novel, Jiang Cheng never complains about his work – except for bitterness when people claim that new disciples are joining the Jiang because of Wei Wuxian. But in this AU, where Jiang Cheng has lost his core and no longer has an outside threat to focus his anger on and keep his insecurities under control… yeah. It was going to get messy no matter what, but that would not have helped things at all.

And here we get into one of the biggest AU elements for Wei Wuxian's backstory vis-à-vis the original MDZS plot, one a lot of you have caught on to already: with Wen Qing and Wen Ning transplanted into the present-day part of the story, *there wouldn't have been a core transfer*. And while I'm of the opinion that Wei Wuxian would have developed guidao regardless… Jiang Cheng being coreless would, IMHO, seriously change some of the later events.

One of the little ironies of Wei Wuxian's cultivation is that the start of the novel, especially with the summoning ritual, gives you the impression that Wei Wuxian's guidao involved a lot of *scholarship*… when in fact, he developed most of it in periods when he had no access to books or, in the beginning, even writing tools! Likewise, his "knowledge of dark arts" that we actually see in canon is based on his memories of browsing the public section of the Lan

library as a bored teenager. (And likely the Jiang library as well; it's never mentioned in the text, but we actually know very little about daily life for the Jiang, period! I went with the "sects don't generally write techniques down" here based on what we know of the fake manuals, but there *would* have been a library.) Just another bit of misdirection…

And why would the Lan keep such records? Silly little headcanon that will probably never come up: given that the Lan were founded by a monk, and I'm setting the MDZS backstory for this fic in the period between the Han and Sui dynasties? They may well have been the new kids on the block with regards to the sects, because Buddhism didn't become widespread until after the fall of the Han. (Nor did the religious version of Daoism, for that matter.) Meaning in turn that Lan An may well have been a foreign immigrant, or at least closely tied to immigrants. Careful record-keeping and strict adherence to Rules and Tradition would have been a way to establish *legitimacy*. (Plus, well, Cloud Recesses basically functioning as a monastery.)

And given that we're told that the abyss would take years and massive effort to cleanse? How many *other* problems like that would have been out there, but after the deaths of the Sunshot Campaign no one remembered where they were, what they were, or how and when to renew the seals? All sorts of casefic plot opportunities there!

Fun fact! Given that "Qishan" is likely modern Shaanxi province, Nightless City is likely meant to be a Fantasy Analogue of *Chang'an*. Although, with regards to sects and borders: given the Wen marching around dictating who could go on night hunts, Jiang Cheng and Jin Ling (and the Lans!) blithely showing up at Mount Dafan, Jin Ling and Jiang Cheng *again* near the Nie tombs in Qinghe, junior disciples from at least three different sects all showing up in Yi, the Jin setting up the temple in Yunping… I'd say it's pretty clear that "territory" is not a major factor in the social landscape of the sects!

Wu Zetian was the only woman to rule China in her own name, beginning around 660 – about a hundred fifty years after Wei Wuxian's time, as I've set it for this fic. She's definitely an example of "well-behaved women don't make history," although of course almost all of our sources about her are not exactly *friendly*. The comment about her being preceded by female rebel leaders comes from *Worldly Saviors and Imperial Authority in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*, by April Hughes.

Chapter 10: Residual

Chapter Summary

> When you live with the reality of the dead sometimes having Opinions, a trip to the museum can get complicated.

Chapter Notes

> Warning to museum professionals, there are some serious violations of best practices in here for the sake of Plot. You may want to find a pillow to scream into…
>
> Also: this chapter also marks the point where Wei Wuxian is fluent enough in modern Mandarin to hold a functional conversation, but also needs to talk about cultivation-specific concepts that they haven't established vocabulary for yet. So! Since I'm writing in English, I am using English for modern Mandarin and the actual Mandarin terms for when Wei Wuxian is resorting to his native Middle Chinese. Meaning I may mess some of them up, because in some cases I had to dig an annoying amount to find the original term!
>
> (And yes, part of this is me being a little frustrated at how many terms are translated rather than transliterated in the fandom. I started in anime fandom; it seems a little silly to me that we have no problem using *samurai* and *onmyouji* and *ofuda* yet use *cultivator* and *talisman*. Also, I am a nerd and want to know the terms so I can research if they have nuances that don't communicate in translation!)
>
> So a quick note about pinyin: I find the tonal markers distracting, reading as an English speaker who knows next to nothing of Mandarin. (I also don't want to be constantly copy-pasting!) So I am including them whenever a term is first introduced (because they're important!), but I leave them off after that. I will include a lexicon with the actual characters in the endnotes.

"Now *that*," Wei Wuxian murmured to himself, the night breeze above the new Cloud Recesses tugging at his hair, "is truly a *nightless city*."

He'd avoided sword flight, this past month. After all, it wasn't as if he had anywhere in particular that he needed to be, and with his core so oddly strained, he hadn't exactly been inclined to indulge in trick-flying for the fun of it, especially when there was no one to fly with! Not to mention that it was generally considered rude, or at least uncouth, to fly outside of training or travel.

Not that he'd ever let that stop him. Flying was *fun*, and contrary to what some masters seemed to believe, having fun was not antithetical to cultivation!

More to the point, flying tended to be rather conspicuous, and it had been obvious from the moment Wen Qing had led him out of that room that *conspicuous* was something to avoid. And after seeing Wen Yuan's reaction to sword flight… well. It was rather obvious that he'd be *very noticeable*.

Granted, people tended not to look *up*. There was a reason he'd gotten into the habit of heading to the rooftops when he wanted to avoid people at cultivation conferences. Still. There was a difference between hiding on a rooftop and hovering in midair and casting a shadow where no shadow had any business appearing.

But after confirming that yes, this *was* Cloud Recesses… well. He'd wanted a proper look what the place had become over the centuries.

So. Flying by daylight was a bit too conspicuous, but by *night*… Damping Suibian's flare was tricky, yes, but he'd done it plenty, wandering during the Yunmeng nights while Lotus Pier slept and scouting by night during the war. And with the brilliant electrical lights that lined the walkways of the complex, no one looking up was going to see anything.

So, night-flying it was!

Except, by the time he'd gotten high enough to take in the whole of the complex spread out across the side of the mountain… he'd been high enough to see the city at the mountain's foot.

The Caiyi he remembered had been anything but *small*. The Gusu Lan may have taken pride in their ascetic seclusion far from the distractions of the world, but Caiyi had been a lively city – and even livelier when many of those ascetic disciples came down the mountain to cut loose for the evening.

But *this*…

Lines of light glittering like dew on a spiderweb catching candlelight and sending up a glow that would put even the biggest festivals to shame stretched all the way to the horizon – even seen from *this* height. Here and there, the pattern was broken by clusters of impossibly tall, thin buildings, taller even than Jinlintai, rising like needles or perhaps the stone forests of Shilin Yi he'd heard about, each one shining with its own light from countless windows.

And then there were the colors. Dominant was the warm golden glow that his mind associated with candles and lanterns, although intellectually he knew they were almost certainly electrical lights. He could also make out brilliant festival-lantern red – if brighter than any lanterns he'd ever seen! – along the straight thoroughfares and blinking (of course they were blinking!) at the tips of the spires. But everywhere he looked, his eyes caught on searing white brilliance like captured starlight, to say nothing of even *stranger* colors, poison-bright greens and blues and even pinks!

There were other oddities. Those thoroughfares, for example: roads or canals, almost certainly. But in addition to what he assumed were street lamps (and his mind kept trying to calculate how much *fuel* all those lamps would demand before he remembered, right, they wouldn't run on oil), there were other lights moving along them. Carriages or boats, he assumed, but much faster than any he'd seen—

Well. *Some* moved faster. Others… heh. Apparently the problem of traffic congestion hadn't changed much!

Then there was the other oddity: a shadowed swatch in the sea of over-bright lights, broken only by a small handful of smaller lights moving slowly across it. From here, it almost looked like…

Oh. Wait. That *was* Lake Biling. It was just that the city had expanded *around* it, effectively swallowing the lake into itself. Which meant—

Wei Wuxian blinked, eyebrows raised.

Just how many people live there now?!

And now he was curious – what had happened to the abyss in the lake? The last he'd heard, the Lan had been making arrangements to seal and cleanse it…

But then Cloud Recesses had burned, and then there had been the war. Besides interrupting the cleansing process, all that destruction would have flowed down the mountain and ultimately *strengthened* the abyss. Worse, with the loss of disciples over the course of the subsequent war, the Gusu Lan might not have been *able* to address the issue of the abyss, even when the war was over.

Unaddressed resentment generally did not just go away. It tended to *fester*.

Granted, fifteen hundred years was a *very* long time! More than long enough for someone, somewhere, eventually, to have handled the situation. On the other hand, with the strange way any account of cultivation seemed to have simply *vanished* from the records…

Well. Whatever had happened, there wasn't exactly anything he could do about it at the moment, other than marking it in his mind as something to check on later if he found an opportunity. This was probably *not* the best time to pop over to the lake for a look-see! Especially when he didn't know how things had changed in the city or for the common people in general, beyond *lots*.

Not that he wasn't itching to go down there and explore, just on general principles – and because he wanted to see more of this strange future he'd ended up in. After all, he was going to be living in this world from here on, he might as well get to know it!

Something to ask Lan Wangji about. But for now, as fascinating – and *pretty* – as the vast plain of lights spread out below was, he *had* come up here for a reason.

And really, the scene spread out directly beneath him was also very pretty, if in a quieter way than the blazing city. None of the wild colors or fast-moving lights (not to mention the absence of flashing and blinking!), but there was a gentle sort of warmth to the lamps following the flowing curves of the footpaths threaded through the complex, strikingly different from the sharp straight lines of the city. From where he stood on Suibian above the complex, the effect was very much like the night lamps he remembered – if significantly brighter and steadier.

In fact, now that he had the city for comparison, he was quite sure that the initial impression he'd had of the complex was correct. Someone, or more likely generations of someones, had gone to quite a bit of trouble to maintain a particular atmosphere in Cloud Recesses. Appropriate, given what Lan Wangji had said about the place being dedicated to the study of the past, and somehow a very very *Lan* thing to do… which just made it funnier that it *also* made the place remind him of the rebuilt parts of Lotus Pier all the more.

He could just imagine the scandalized looks on Jiang Cheng's *and* the Lans' faces if they'd heard that!

Not all of the complex was quite so brightly lit. The upper level that backed onto the wooded area where the Cold Springs and Lan Wangji's home were did have them, but they were sparser and more scattered among the relatively dense structures. Given that area seemed to be the original core of the complex, he suspected that either someone had judged the addition of electrical lights disruptive to the desired ambiance, or the lights themselves were deemed too difficult or expensive to add to an existing area, much the way ancestral wards were rarely changed due to both the resistance of established tradition and the difficulty of changing sigils that usually had been carved into the very foundations.

Which… Wei Wuxian squinted and drifted a little higher, trying to get a sense of the overall form of the older complex. Unfortunately, those lovely lights were working against him! Yes, the glare made him harder to spot against the night sky, but it also made it harder for him to pick out the details of the layout. Still, if he took what he saw and matched it in his mind's eye to the map that Lan Wangji had provided him in service of their subterfuge…

Well, it did look like the heart of the complex was at least similar to what he remembered visiting seven years and quite a few centuries ago. Although there were a few interesting absences; for one thing, he hadn't seen any sign of that dreaded wall of rules!

Hm. Maybe Lan Yi had gotten rid of it the way she'd occasionally threatened; she'd complained more than once that it was a legacy of Lan An's attempt to have things both ways, leaving the monastery to be with his fated one only to bring the monastery with him in all but name.

"Which works for a community of monks. Not so much if you want a functional clan!" she'd grumbled. *"Master Kong warned against trying to dictate morals with rules for a reason!"*

Still, he doubted she'd actually have done it. For all she'd inveighed against some of her sect's more hidebound practices, Lan Yi had cared about its traditions. More likely the wall had been destroyed or obscured during one of the many purges of this religion or that custom; Wen Yuan's excellent history book had already mentioned several, and Wei Wuxian doubted

they'd become any less frequent over time. Odds were that the Wen incident had been far from the last time Cloud Recesses had burned and been rebuilt!

For that matter, he *knew* it wasn't. He'd seen the signs of recent rebuilding himself… and met the ghosts.

Still. Something about the layout felt *odd*. Like something teasing just at the edge of recognition, but different enough that the similarities refused to come into focus.

Granted, part of that was the change in the fengshui. Cloud Recesses had been founded here not only for the Cold Springs, but for the natural flow of energy; the mountains created a shielding wall that warded off the shifting energy flows of the outside world, with the complex settled on the southeastern slope of the mountains, and thus shielded from the northwest and the demon gate by the bulk of the peak. The complex itself had echoed and enhanced the effect, creating an island of still serenity, aloof from the mortal world not only physically but in its very energy.

That thought led to another, and Wei Wuxian suddenly choked on a snort, biting his sleeve so he didn't waste all his efforts to be inconspicuous by cackling madly in midair. Because… well, apparently there'd been something to his silly thought that he'd somehow awakened in a community of immortals secluded from the world, because that had definitely been the original intent of the place!

He'd found it stifling as a teenager. Yunmeng Jiang was… well, had been a sect embedded in the flowing waters and rivers, with a cultivation philosophy of challenging oneself and growth through striving – very much *of* the world, rather than holding remote from it. It had been interesting to discuss the philosophies of their sects with Lan Yi and realize that the two opposite paths actually both held the same ultimate ideal.

Of course, that had been then. The Cloud Recesses of *now*… For one thing, the fall of part of the peak of the southern mountain had altered the natural fengshui somewhat, adding turbulence to what had been a smooth flow. It seemed as though the layout of the complex had been modified to compensate, but in the process an underlying pattern had been disrupted.

The problem was, he couldn't make out *what* that underlying pattern had been.

Shaking his head in amusement, Wei Wuxian guided Suibian down towards the quiet area near the Cold Springs he'd taken off from. That was enough for a preliminary scouting run! And Lan Wangji had said that they would be able to visit the archives in a day or two – perhaps they might look for some older maps showing the original layout, for the sake of his curiosity.

Honestly, what he was most looking forward to was the "museum" that Lan Wangji had mentioned. Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan had explained the basic concept, and it sounded *fascinating*: a whole hall dedicated to exploring and explaining the ways of the past – and open for anyone to visit, no less.

Granted, he'd raised a mental eyebrow at that. There might not be wards requiring a jade token for anyone to come or go – and oh, the look on Lan Wangji's face when he'd mentioned that! – but Cloud Recesses was still not exactly what he'd call *easily accessible*.

Still! He was looking forward to seeing what these people had made of the past – and, maybe, laughing at the parts they'd gotten wrong, because there would certainly be a few. And he was also curious to see how they presented the ages between then and now – not to mention seeing what people had come up with over the centuries!

Besides, it was going to be nice to get out and start actually *doing* things again. Between the duties of a first disciple, fighting a war, rebuilding Lotus Pier and then cleansing the Burial Mounds… he wasn't really *used* to idleness anymore. And while Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan were lovely, he was curious about what this new society was like.

So it would make for an interesting excursion. And maybe when they were done, he could ask Lan Wangji about more of such ventures – perhaps even down the mountain to see what Caiyi had become!

Lan Wangji was startled to see his brother standing at the door to the Cloud Recesses museum.

Lan Xichen smiled at his pause. "I've fully stepped down from the project," he said, answering Lan Wangji's first unspoken question. "Huaisang was correct, it was inappropriate for me to continue after my previous missteps. Still, I feel as though I owe Wei Wuxian an apology. I thought perhaps a tour of the collections would be appreciated?"

Lan Wangji hesitated. Technically, he should decline; access to the collections was the responsibility of the curators. But… while the museum displays were certainly well done, the bulk of the collections were kept in the back archives – including several items he would particularly like to show Wei Wuxian. And while his research meant he'd spent a great deal of time in the collections, he did not have free access to them, and Wei Wuxian's circumstances made the normal protocol of submitting a formal research request somewhat… difficult. He had been resigned to waiting until the project went public, but… "Have you cleared it with the head curator?"

"Uncle did," Lan Xichen assured him.

Ah. That made more sense. As an accomplished archaeologist and head of the department, Lan Qiren had the authority to clear such special tours, although the archivists had likely assumed that he would be accompanying the visitors.

"Then thank you," he said at last. He was not entirely sure he liked skirting proper protocols in such a manner, but… needs must.

Lan Xichen smiled – and then blinked as Wei Wuxian leaned around Lan Wangji to look at him.

“Ah! I remember you,” he said cheerfully, and stepped past Lan Wangji to bow a greeting – in the modern manner, but executed with the reflexive precision of someone who had grown up in a world where an incorrect depth of bow could be a mortal insult, a juxtaposition that Lan Wangji couldn’t help finding charming. “I apologize for our uncomfortable first meeting,” he added, his words formal but lightened by a wry smile at his own understatement.

Lan Xichen had visibly started when Wei Wuxian spoke, and he was still blinking a little too rapidly as he bowed in response. “I… believe the apology should be mine,” he said, oddly hesitant in a way that almost turned the statement into a question before he rallied himself and added, “You were understandably confused, and there was no harm done. Do not concern yourself with it.”

Wei Wuxian smiled brightly as he straightened, and then it was his turn to hesitate. “Ah…” he started, a flicker of his eyes betraying that he was searching his memory for the appropriate phrase before he huffed slightly. “What is your name?” he asked, a rueful smile showing his awareness that the question was rudely direct.

Lan Wangji made a mental note. They had covered basic questions like asking for names that very first day, but they’d never gone back to go over the proper etiquette and polite phrasing; there’d been no need before this, and he had not anticipated someone meeting them at the museum. An oversight, and one they would need to correct before his uncle came for a formal introduction. Even knowing better intellectually, Lan Qiren *would* react as if it were intentional rudeness, rather than the natural fumbles of someone speaking an unfamiliar language, and that was a negative first impression they did not need.

Fortunately, his brother was far less rigid in his expectations. Smiling, he tilted his head. “That’s right, I never properly introduced myself, did I? I am Lan Xichen. I am Wangji’s older brother.”

Wei Wuxian brightened. “So that is why you have…” He paused. “Hm. Look that is similar?”

“Resemblance,” Wen Yuan provided.

Wei Wuxian snapped his fingers. “That!”

Lan Xichen chuckled. “Yes; we were sometimes mistaken for twins when we were younger,” he added, and Lan Wangji…

He was mostly trying not to glower. Lan Xichen hid it well under social graces, but his brother was *staring*.

Admittedly, Wei Wuxian struck a striking image. He was dressed in modern clothing, as had been his practice since leaving the lab. His original robes had been carefully stored away for safekeeping in his room, following the best preservation practices Lan Wangji could achieve without sending them to a curator; that was a choice he felt Wei Wuxian should make for himself, when the time came. But on some whim – perhaps because this was his first “formal” outing – he’d chosen to wear the outfit that Lan Wangji had initially provided, the

one that had been chosen specifically to make his identity clear while being undeniably modern, separating Wei Wuxian the living man from Yiling Laozu, the body in the ice.

It was also very, *very* flattering, and Lan Xichen was *absolutely* taking note of the way the clothes showed off Wei Wuxian's powerful shoulders, trim waist, and long legs.

Long, muscular, and *very nice* legs.

Lan Wangji was not going to glare. Lan Xichen was just looking – most likely too distracted by the overall effect to note the details. And it was aesthetic appreciation only; he knew perfectly well that his brother had no particular interest in men. And he would have no right to object even if it were otherwise.

Besides. Lan Xichen would *notice* Lan Wangji trying to kill him with his eyes. And that was a conversation that Lan Wangji had no intention of having with his brother. Ever.

And while Lan Wangji was preoccupied with his own ridiculousness, Lan Xichen smiled at Wei Wuxian and Wen Yuan. "The museum is technically closed today; we'll have the place to ourselves for as long as we like," he said, directing his words to the teenager. "I trust you know the exhibits well enough to give the tour?"

Wen Yuan had the decorum to not whoop out loud, but he definitely *bounced* in a way that suggested that he was doing an internal fist pump before reaching out to grab Wei Wuxian's hand. "Come on, you're going to *love* this!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Wei Wuxian laughed, letting himself be tugged along in the boy's enthusiastic wake and leaving Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen to follow along behind them at a more dignified pace.

Stepping inside, Lan Wangji allowed himself a moment to let the cool air, the quiet, the echoing spaces and the weight of *time* sink in. The museum had been one of his favorite places even as a child – had probably put him on his first steps to his vocation. Every time he walked through the doors, he had a sense of coming home.

It wasn't a large museum, by conscious design; after the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, it had seemed impolitic (dangerous) to be too obvious about their ties to the ancient past. With good reason; the archives had been one of the buildings targeted when the historic complex had been attacked and burned. But by some amazing stroke of luck, the contents of the archives had survived virtually undamaged, and the building that held them suffered mostly superficial damage, although the buildings around it had burned almost to the ground.

But the destruction had also been a blessing of sorts, prompting a deep review of the complex's architectural history as they sought to rebuild it as completely and accurately as possible. They had even opened several archaeological excavations around the lost buildings to better understand their history and ground-truth the written records; Lan Qiren had been part of those when he was young.

The core of the museum sprang from that research, with the permanent exhibit tracing the history of the complex and its evolution across the centuries from a small monastic community to the university of today. The exhibits were not elaborate; each section was devoted to a particular era of the complex's history, featuring a small scale model of the layout and a narrative of what life at Cloud Recesses would have been like and the role it had played in the local community, with space set aside for the discussion of any particularly notable events that might have occurred. Each section also held a regularly rotated set of two or three artifacts from the collection, explaining their origins, uses, and significance to the time period in question.

It will have to be expanded, Lan Wangji realized with a sense of wonder. It would not happen immediately, of course; no responsible scholar would rely on a single source for their information, not even an eyewitness's account. It would have to be checked, verified against known sources, previous conclusions tested against the new information to see what insights might be gleaned, new research conducted… The process would take years, most likely.

But it was a dizzying prospect even so – that one day there would be a section of the museum devoted to the time *before* the monastery, when Cloud Recesses had been the enclave of a clan dedicated to *actual cultivation*.

"…and this is what it would have looked like at the height of the Tang dynasty, before the Five Dynasties period. But a lot of scholars think they expected trouble, because the wall around the complex was reinforced then, and – oh! They have the scrolls on display, you *have* to see this!"

Lan Wangji carefully did not laugh as Wen Yuan's practiced narrative fell aside when the boy rushed to the plinth holding a set of guqin scores written by one of the monks. Wei Wuxian had been studying the model of the complex with thoughtful intensity, but he willingly let Wen Yuan lead him away to gush over the scores. Wen Yuan had volunteered at the museum many times, but it was obvious that his enthusiasm over showing his favorites to *Wei Wuxian* had completely overcome any attempt at poise.

"He's very good with A'Yuan, isn't he?" Lan Xichen murmured, watching them.

He sounded… surprised, and Lan Wangji raised a mental eyebrow. After all, his brother had been right there when Wei Wuxian had stepped between Wen Yuan and an overreacting man holding a gun, and then comforted Wen Yuan afterwards when the stress of the situation had caught up with the boy. Surely it had been obvious that Wei Wuxian was good with him?

Then again… Lan Xichen had been, with good reason, rather distracted; it made sense that certain details would not have registered with him. And, of course, protecting a child in a fraught situation and helping him through the aftermath was not the same as letting an overexcited teenager pull him about, or earnestly engaging that teenager in conversation about his favorite artifacts. Especially when Lan Xichen did not know that they were housemates and had had plenty of opportunities to become comfortable with each other.

For that matter… intellectually, of course, Lan Xichen was aware that Wei Wuxian was a living, active, intelligent man. But at a subconscious level, his concept of the man was still dominated by the motionless corpse in the ice. He still referred to Wei Wuxian as "Yiling

Laozu" most of the time. At most, Lan Xichen knew Wei Wuxian as a tall figure in ancient robes, unable to communicate beyond gestures, disoriented and confused. Quite the contrast from the bright-eyed man in modern clothing, speaking modern Mandarin and letting a teenager lead him about.

It occurred to him, rather suddenly, that while his reports had contained factual information about Wei Wuxian and his progress, it had not occurred to him to convey anything about Wei Wuxian's character or personality, except inasmuch as such things impacted his adaptation to life in the modern world. Lan Xichen had only met him in the chaos of that first day; only in the context of an isolated, extraordinary single event. In a very real sense, this was the first time he'd really been able to see Wei Wuxian moving through the world as a *person*.

And the observation certainly was not wrong.

"I wonder if he had children," Lan Xichen added, as Wei Wuxian scanned the score and then hummed part of it, to Wen Yuan's obvious delight. And Lan Wangji's shock; he had been under the impression that the Gongche notation system had not been used until the Tang period, but clearly Wei Wuxian was familiar with it.

Belatedly realizing that Lan Xichen's comment had actually been an indirect question, Lan Wangji gathered his distracted thoughts. "I have not asked," he admitted. Thus far, he had avoided asking more personal questions, in his efforts to honor the fine balance between the natural ebb and flow of conversation, simple curiosity, unwanted prying, and illicit research. Questions about larger scale historical events such as the war were relatively safe, especially because Wei Wuxian himself had been asking many of the questions. Inquiring after his personal life and relationships felt far too much like fishing for *gossip*. The story about the Xuanwu and Wen Chao was the closest they had come to Wei Wuxian's personal history.

He was still trying to wrap his mind around the *giant man-eating turtle-snake* part.

Still, if he were to venture a guess, he suspected Wei Wuxian had not been married; he was still relatively young for such things by the standards of his era, and it seemed as if recent events had been too hectic for arranging marriages. More likely, he'd been a teacher in charge of his sect's disciples.

…Maybe. Daily life in the cultivation sects and the individual characters of the sects and clans were another area Lan Wangji had opted to tread lightly around asking about. It had felt dangerously close to straying into his own personal research interests. So most of what he knew or had surmised was extrapolated from offhand comments – like the fact that Wei Wuxian was clearly in the habit of referring to his sect heir and later leader by his personal name, despite being approximately the same age and presumably subordinate in social status, given that he did not carry the clan name. Thus far, Lan Wangji's initial guess of personal retainer, or perhaps a high-ranking sect disciple, seemed the most probable explanation. But it was more guesswork and supposition than anything concrete.

In fact, he had to wonder if *Wei Wuxian* had been clear about his status, as odd as that thought was in the context of the rigidly hierarchical society of ancient nobility. But it was possible that the man's position had been deliberately liminal in some way. But that, too, was nothing more than guesswork and supposition.

Lan Xichen chuckled. “Well, I think A’Yuan has things well in hand, so I’ll stop distracting you,” he said lightly, eyes dancing.

Chagrined that his wandering thoughts were so obvious, Lan Wangji inclined his head. “You will not accompany us?”

Lan Xichen smiled wryly. “I’m sure you and A’Yuan can manage without me underfoot! Besides, Huaisang was correct – it will not look good for the project if I involve myself any more than absolutely necessary, after everything. Just come find me when you’re ready to see the collections; I’ll be in the main office.”

For just a second, he hesitated, smile faltering as he glanced at Wei Wuxian to reveal a perplexed, almost nonplussed expression, before he turned and walked away.

Likely re-evaluating many of his decisions after being confronted with the reality of Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji suspected. He sighed. Truthfully, if they had been able to properly *introduce* Wei Wuxian to the project team rather than keeping him isolated in the lab, it would likely have circumvented a great deal of trouble, and avoided many of the problems haunting the project now.

But, of course, at the time that had been impossible, thanks to the barriers of language and understanding and, of course, the quarantine. Even this meeting had only happened after Wen Qing had given a cautious go-ahead.

“Professor Lan!”

With a blink, he looked away from Lan Xichen’s retreating back and over to where Wen Yuan was waiting next to the entrance to the temporary exhibit gallery, waving an arm as Wei Wuxian watched with undisguised amusement.

Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow and Wen Yuan flushed, apparently aware that his volume and energetic motions were definitely pushing the edges of the appropriate decorum for a museum, private viewing or no. But the boy continued to beckon him enthusiastically – if with slightly more restraint than before – and so Lan Wangji walked over.

“It’s your exhibit on display, Professor,” Wen Yuan explained as Lan Wangji joined them. “You should be the one showing him that!”

His exhibit? Lan Wangji flicked his eyes through the door, then realized. It was not actually his exhibit per se; the history and medical departments had collaborated on an exhibit that traced the history of medicine and healing practices from ancient times to the present. However, he had been tapped as a primary consultant for his work on ancient folklore and religio-magical practices – most of which had been deeply intertwined with concerns about sickness, health and healing.

Privately, he suspected that his uncle’s insistence that he participate in the Yiling Laozu project had more than a little to do with Lan Qiren’s offended sensibilities over Lan Wangji’s “foolish hobby” being treated as serious academic expertise worthy of consultation, an attempt to humble literature and lore by contrasting them with “proper science.”

Although if that had been the case, his uncle's intentions had backfired *spectacularly*.

With everything that had happened in the Yiling Laozu project, he'd forgotten that the exhibit was still open. Understanding Wen Yuan's intention now, Lan Wangji inclined his head in acceptance and led the way through the arch that separated the special exhibit space at the back of the museum. It was an older part of the structure, with a low raised platform in the center, featuring small extensions in each of the cardinal directions. It had probably once served a ceremonial purpose, but it served equally well now to display key artifacts for the exhibits.

"The exhibit is a timeline, beginning with the Xia dynasty," Lan Wangji explained, as Wei Wuxian eyed the platform, the columns and the displays around the room, all with equal interest. "The displays on the wall explain how medicine changed over time. The cases show items used to treat injuries and diseases in those times."

Wei Wuxian glanced at the panels on the walls, but after a moment shook his head slightly and redirected his attention to the artifact displays. Understandable; the history panels were rather text-heavy. To Lan Wangji, the summary of the history was almost frustratingly short and lacking in detail, but for a layperson, even one who was a native speaker, they were probably a little overwhelming. For Wei Wuxian… well. While his grasp of the simplified characters and more vernacular grammar was impressive, it was still fundamentally an unfamiliar language.

Then Wei Wuxian immediately headed for the modern day part of the exhibit, and Lan Wangji had to bite back the reflex to correct him – because it was a *timeline*, you couldn't appreciate the logical progression of change over time unless you began at the beginning and followed the timeline forward…

Except, of course, to Wei Wuxian it would be the modern day technology that was the most intriguing. What would be the point of defamiliarizing modern medicine by setting it in historic context to someone for whom it was *already* unfamiliar?

Although. Knowing Wei Wuxian as he now did, Lan Wangji was unsurprised when the man finished in the modern day section and then, rather than working his way backwards, promptly cut across the room to look at the most ancient part instead, the medicine decanters from the Xia, the ritual vessel painted with figures thought to be performing a healing dance, the display of inscriptions from the Shang oracle bones. Just the reproduced inscriptions; they'd discussed putting some of the oracle bones themselves on display, but ultimately decided against it in favor of emphasizing the written elements.

Wei Wuxian, he noted, paused longer at those, reading the short explanations accompanying the individual artifacts with a look of fascination. It made Lan Wangji wonder – had he seen such things before? Tomb robbing had existed since tombs were first created, and the upheavals of the disunified period would have been ripe opportunity for such things.

Then again. Wei Wuxian was apparently accustomed to dealing with *demons and ghosts*. It was entirely possible he'd encountered such things in a different context entirely.

That was an unsettling thought.

Wen Yuan was glancing at him curiously, obviously having expected him to take a more active role. But Lan Wangji was content to follow Wei Wuxian's lead, answering the occasional absent question while he watched Wei Wuxian's reactions as the man made his way through the displays. Particularly as he reached the section dedicated to his own time period. He read the descriptions with the same interest he'd shown for everything else, and it was fascinating to watch the reactions dancing across that mobile face: interest, amusement, *be*musement – and at least once a very poorly disguised snicker at what was apparently an amusingly erroneous interpretation.

Well. He was looking at an analysis of the *Yellow Court Classic* and how it led to the concept of the three elixir fields. Given that the interpretation had been written by scholars who had been writing on the assumption that such cultivation was not actually *possible*, it would have been stranger if there hadn't been any errors.

Lan Wangji soothed his wounded pride with the thought that he could consult with Wei Wuxian on how to correct the errors.

Assuming the man was interested.

Lan Wangji had to do a mental double take at that thought. On some level he'd simply assumed that Wei Wuxian would naturally care about such things…

But Lan Wangji was a scholar who had dedicated years of training and effort to understanding the past. Wei Wuxian had simply *lived* it. His interest in history was at least partly because he was trying to wrap his mind around a changed world – and to try to learn what had happened to the friends and family and even the spiritual culture he'd known.

Now that he thought about it, rather than unquestioningly *assuming*… it occurred to Lan Wangji that Wei Wuxian might well not even *want* to dedicate the rest of his life to the past he'd left behind. Might find it an unwanted or even painful reminder of what he'd lost. Given his temperament, the eager way he'd thrown himself into learning about how things had changed, he might well prefer to embrace the modern world wholeheartedly, rather than keeping one foot mired in an ancient time that he would never be able to return to.

Which… raised an interesting question, one he hadn't considered before: what would Wei Wuxian *do* with himself, when the dust had settled? Nie Huaisang was correct that he would always have the celebrity of his circumstances haunting his footsteps, but celebrity was not in itself a livelihood. Nor did Wei Wuxian strike Lan Wangji as the sort to be content relying on fame and public attention to fill his time; the man was too intelligent and too *active* for idleness to appeal.

Granted, he wasn't without skills. Lan Wangji could just imagine how many people would leap at the chance to learn the sort of cultivation that let one ride a flying sword or walk on the surface of the water. Setting up such a school would not be easy; there would be questions of accreditation, location, how students would be selected, how *many* students, how to pay for everything…

But it would be an incredible endeavor. One that Lan Wangji would love to see realized – assuming that was something Wei Wuxian was interested in.

He was resolutely ignoring the part of his mind that was making suggestions about where he might fit into that hypothetical long-term future. It was *not helpful*.

Besides. The question of what Wei Wuxian might do for a living was effectively a moot point until the man had learned enough of modern language and culture to begin actually integrating into the modern world. At the moment, making an independent living for himself wasn't even an option.

And in the meantime, Wei Wuxian had almost completed his circuit of the exhibit. A quiet word sent Wen Yuan trotting off (and then, sheepishly, speed-walking) to find Lan Xichen, while Lan Wangji gathered himself and approached Wei Wuxian.

Looking up from a set of Song Dynasty apothecary scales and the accompanying summary of the way technological advances had influenced the making of medicines, Wei Wuxian grinned at him. "You made this?" he asked, a flicker of his hand indicating the entire gallery.

"I assisted," Lan Wangji corrected, feeling oddly… anxious, perhaps. It was the same butterflies-in-his-stomach sensation that he recalled from his classes in the guqin as a child, when his teachers had insisted that he perform in recitals. Which was ridiculous; he had no cause for stage jitters when he'd only been a consultant on the exhibit.

And yet… it did feel strangely personal, watching Wei Wuxian study the displays that represented the final project that Lan Wangji had worked on before the unexpected reality of a living, breathing Yiling Laozu had turned everything on its head.

Wei Wuxian stepped back, looking out over the exhibit as a whole. "The past is important to you," he commented.

"Yes." How could it not be? The present was built upon the past.

Wei Wuxian glanced at him, eyes amused, and Lan Wangji realized he was doing it again – leaving the conversation, and the relationship, entirely one-sided. Chagrined, Lan Wangji gathered his thoughts for a moment, and then continued. "We must learn from the past. Too many things are too easily forgotten or ignored." Witness the mysterious disappearance of the arts of mystical cultivation as Wei Wuxian practiced them!

And… he'd intended to leave it at that. But when he looked at brightly attentive grey eyes, he found himself unexpectedly adding, "And… my mother loved stories of ancient times. I remember she would often tell them to me, before she died. I was a child, and they were… important." *Precious*, he almost said, but the word would not come to his mouth.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian said, quiet and a little startled by the confession. He glanced at the exhibit again. "I don't remember my parents," he said, almost as if offering the information in exchange. And then shrugged when Lan Wangji looked at him, waiting. "They were… people who went places. They died. I was very small then! Sect Leader Jiang found me a few years after."

Found. As if he had been lost until then. Had anyone cared for him? To Lan Wangji's knowledge, there had been little in the way of support for orphans, especially if he was

correct in understanding "people who went places" to mean that Wei Wuxian's parents had been itinerants of some sort, who thus would not have had relatives nearby and were likely considered suspect by nature.

He should perhaps ask for more details; if Wei Wuxian had been homeless for a time, that was likely relevant to his medical history. And Lan Wangji was curious as to how Wei Wuxian had then become part of the Jiang clan's inner circle, assuming he had interpreted the relationship with Jiang Cheng correctly.

Instead, he made a mental note to pursue those questions later, and admitted in turn, "I was always interested in the stories about cultivators. Although even as a child I knew – I *believed* I knew," he corrected, "that they could not be true."

Wei Wuxian gave him an odd look at that, a combination of startled and intrigued – but before he could say anything, Lan Xichen laughed.

"You didn't mention that you liked to pretend to be a cultivator," Lan Wangji's brother said, standing in the doorway.

Lan Wangji glared at him, suddenly glad that he *hadn't* pursued the question of Wei Wuxian's childhood; that was far too personal a topic to have in the presence of a *nosy eavesdropper* who apparently had no compunctions against disclosing *non-relevant details*.

And Wei Wuxian's face immediately lit with a mischievous grin. "Oh?" he prompted, radiating false innocence.

Lan Wangji stepped up the force of his glare a notch.

Unfortunately, his brother had long since developed an immunity to Lan Wangji's best death glares. "Oh yes," he said, a sly glint to his eye that said he was perfectly aware that Lan Wangji was willing him to *shush* and cheerfully ignoring it. "I believe he even insisted on having a proper cultivator's name. Lan… Zhan, I believe it was?"

Lan Wangji did not particularly subscribe to the idea of a Cain instinct. But sometimes he very much *sympathized* with the concept.

Wei Wuxian laughed, a bright, warm sound that Lan Wangji couldn't help but appreciate even in the depths of his fuming embarrassment. "Lan Zhan?" he echoed, sketching the character for *clear* in the air, and grinned. "That is a good name! It… fits? Seems correct?"

"Suits," Lan Wangji corrected, careful to keep his face stone-still and not giving away how much he was squirming on the inside. He'd been going through a particularly recalcitrant phase at the time, exacerbated by classmates who had found much enjoyment making fun of his "stodgy, old-fashioned" given name. His mother had laughed and used the alternative name cheerfully, but his uncle had been adamantly against the whole business.

He didn't even remember how his father had reacted.

Regardless, he had given it up after their parents were gone. He did *not* appreciate Lan Xichen bringing that childhood foolishness up again now!

Lan Xichen chuckled at his flat stare, but this time, *finally*, he actually took the hint. "Now, I believe I offered you a tour of the collections. So if you will follow me…"

He turned and headed for the door leading to the back offices and the working space of the museum, Wen Yuan following eagerly behind. Wei Wuxian, however, hung back slightly, matching Lan Wangji's calmer pace.

"So… Lan Zhan!"

Forgetting himself for a moment, Lan Wangji glared. He was going to regret Wei Wuxian learning about that old folly, he knew it.

Wei Wuxian simply grinned at him. "Lan *Zhan* wanted to be a cultivator?"

"I was a child," he said stiffly, desperately hoping that would be the end of it but knowing better.

"Do you still want?"

…What?

Wei Wuxian glanced ahead, to where Lan Xichen was entering the pass code on the collections archive door, and then reached into the pocket of his long jacket and pulled out a sheaf of paper.

A sheaf of paper that shouldn't have *fit* in said pocket without being obtrusively obvious, but Lan Wangji was too distracted by the characters inked on the page to care.

Fundamentals of Cultivating a Golden Core.

Stunned, he slowly thumbed through the pages. The text was written in Middle Chinese, he noted – not surprising, given the complexity of the subject matter, far beyond Wei Wuxian's current, if improving, grasp of the modern language. But it was also interspersed with detailed illustrations, some in the classical style but others clearly inspired by the diagrams and blueprints Wei Wuxian had seen in his books.

It was obviously incomplete, but the sheer amount of information, the *care* that had been put into it…! Lan Wangji had been aware that Wei Wuxian had been working on something during the quiet lulls in the day, but he'd never imagined *this*.

Wei Wuxian grinned and shrugged at Lan Wangji's stare. "I was… leading disciple? First? Training students was my responsibility. I know how to teach." He tapped the papers with a finger briskly. "But explaining is difficult in *one* language!" Meeting Lan Wangji's eyes, he raised his eyebrows pointedly.

Lan Wangji hesitated. "You should speak to Wen Qing," he said slowly, feeling almost numb. Wei Wuxian couldn't *possibly* be offering what he seemed to be. Could he? "She is Wen

Yuan's guardian, and a doctor."

Wei Wuxian nodded. "I will!" he agreed brightly, and then fixed Lan Wangji with an expectant look. "But do you *want*?"

Oh. He was.

"…Am I not too old?" he asked. Because wasn't that a repeated theme in the stories – the importance of starting before it was too late?

Wei Wuxian snorted. "Which of us is the cultivator?" he demanded.

For a moment, Lan Wangji froze. Breathless.

Then Wei Wuxian grinned again and skipped ahead to join Lan Xichen as the door opened. Mind still reeling, Lan Wangji numbly followed them the collections area.

Wen Yuan had to bite down a shiver of anticipation as they walked into the first room of the collections. He loved literature and history; visiting the archives to study ancient documents was an incredible experience. But something about the uncompromising *solidity* of physical artifacts made history seem viscerally *real*, like an actual tangible presence in the room with him.

Documents were amazing. There was *so much* information in them! But they were words. People did all sorts of things with words. Words were for things you *wanted* to say. In the end, people could say – or write – whatever they wanted. But physical artifacts were the record of things that people *did*.

Of course, he was also shivering because the collections area was *cold*. Which he knew was intentional, to protect and preserve the artifacts stored there. But somehow, between the dark, heavy stone walls of the original building and the looming bulk of the state-of-the-art moving shelves pressing close on either side of the aisle and the low, dim lighting meant to protect easily damaged fabrics and paper and paints… the back rooms always felt colder than the actual setting on the thermostat. He loved *visiting* the collections, but he usually tried not to stay for very long.

And, of course, like the overexcited idiot he was, he'd forgotten to bring a jacket. Oops.

Wei Wuxian seemed untroubled by the chill – although he *did* have a jacket, at least – but he made a thoughtful sound as he walked in behind them, obviously making note of the changed atmosphere as he looked around.

Lan Xichen started to walk down the aisle, then hesitated and looked at Lan Wangji, who had followed behind Wei Wuxian. "Have you talked to him about the contents of the collections? Many of these artifacts were found in graves – I don't want to show him something he would consider offensive."

Wen Yuan blinked. That was a weird question to ask – especially when Wei Wuxian was standing right there!

But the man just chuckled, clearly unoffended. “If the things are still there in old graves, then to take them is not a problem,” he said lightly, peering down an open space in the shelves at a row of funerary vessels. “It is *new* graves that can be…” He looked at Wen Yuan. “What was your word? Tetchy?”

Wen Yuan laughed, only barely managing to keep his volume appropriate. He’d been trying to describe his friends to Wei Wuxian after he had asked about the “ghost voices” (and Wen Yuan *knew* Wei Wuxian was deliberately pulling his leg by saying it like that, and yet he still fell for it every single time!), and he hadn’t been able to come up with any better way to explain Jin Ling and his whole… Jin Ling-ness.

Lan Xichen looked nonplussed for a minute, which… oh. Of course. He hadn’t expected Wei Wuxian to understand him. Which was fair; Wen Yuan was pretty sure that *graves* and *artifacts* and *offend* were probably not usually on the list of the top five hundred words someone just learning a new language would know. But they actually had spent a while talking about the museum before they’d come, and a little about archaeology in general, and… well, suffice to say that the man’s vocabulary was kind of a weird mix.

Lan Xichen recovered smoothly, though, and smiled at Wei Wuxian. “I’m glad to know it’s not a concern, then,” he said. Maybe a little patronizingly, but then again, he probably thought he was just humoring a quaint ancient superstition. Wen Yuan knew that details about cultivation were some of the things that Lan Wangji had decided to record but not disseminate until Wei Wuxian was in a position to decide for himself what he wanted to share publicly.

Although… “Was that a problem? Tetchy new graves, I mean?” he asked.

Wei Wuxian tapped his cheek. “Hm! Generally not, if the grave was… right? Correct? …to begin with.” He smiled crookedly.

Um. Wen Yuan was not stupid, and he knew his history. Wei Wuxian had lived in the sixth century. Warring would-be dynasties, family feuds, mass executions, plagues, famine… he could fill in the blanks just fine.

Wei Wuxian gestured to the shelves they were walking past. “So… if you worry about offending, why do you take things from graves?” he asked curiously. “To study the past, it is a strange way to do things.”

“It is not just graves,” Lan Wangji corrected him. “The goal is to find things that people used and understand them. Written records tell only the stories of the writers.”

Wen Yuan carefully did not laugh at Wei Wuxian’s wryly quirked eyebrow. For someone who didn’t know the phrase “ya think?”, that was a *very* eloquent nonverbal version of it!

Lan Wangji didn’t laugh, but Wen Yuan could tell that he was equally amused. “Material things give us information about the part of the world that those who wrote did not consider

important. The lives of ordinary people."

There was something measuring, thoughtful, about the way that Wei Wuxian looked at him at that. "Ordinary people. Farmers? People of towns? Merchants? You want to know about them, and not gentry?"

Wen Yuan had to smile ruefully at that. He couldn't blame Wei Wuxian for being surprised. The simple fact that he knew the word for gentry and not townspeople or peasants said a lot about the sort of things they'd mostly talked about, didn't it? It hadn't been an *intentional* blind spot, exactly; it was just that they'd been trying to go over history… and history tended to be shaped and written by people with *status*.

"The gentry," Lan Wangji said, echoing Wen Yuan's thoughts with the dust-dry expressionlessness that Wen Yuan had taken over a year to realize was the professor's version of sarcasm, "have already told us plenty."

Already familiar with Lan Wangji's sense of humor, Wei Wuxian snickered. "They do that," he said, with an odd wry quirk to his smile that suggested he could come up with a whole list of examples from personal experience.

Lan Wangji looked at the shelves. "The vast majority of people never left written records. That does not make their lives less important."

Wei Wuxian just chuckled, shaking his head. "There are not many who… will have? Would have? …agreed," he said wryly, but there was something softer, warmer, in his smile when he looked at Lan Wangji.

Wen Yuan noted that expression, and the quiet satisfaction in Lan Wangji's eyes, and mentally crossed his fingers.

Lan Xichen waited a moment, but after a moment, when it was clear that Lan Wangji was finished, he cleared his throat and smiled when Wei Wuxian turned attentively to him. "We do have many items from archaeological sites here, yes. But Cloud Recesses has a long history of preserving artifacts. When the original temple was founded, monks and supporters brought many items to keep here…" He paused. Blinked. "Although I suppose," he added slowly, "if it's really true that Cloud Recesses as an institution existed in your time, some of those original collections probably pre-dated its establishment as a temple…"

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows rose at that, and for a moment, his eyes flickered around the room, looking at… the corners? The ceiling? "That would be… interesting," he said.

And… oh, wow. It *would*, wouldn't it? Because that would mean some of those original artifacts dated back to when the Gusu Lan were in charge, and they'd been *cultivators*.

Um. Wait. Weren't a lot of things given to temples for *exorcism*? Only, if there weren't any cultivators around after a while…

While Lan Xichen had been talking, Lan Wangji had moved ahead of them, checking the identification numbers as he went before coming to a stop in front of a shelf that had already

been rolled open. “Brother?”

Lan Xichen chuckled. “Ah yes! I thought you might want to show him that, so I checked. It’s in the conservation lab; a visiting researcher asked to look at it. We can go look at it now, if you like? I imagine that would be more interesting than just…” He waved a hand at the densely packed shelves.

Curious, Wen Yuan craned his neck to peer around the corner of the shelving unit. The minute his eye landed on the identification card left as a placeholder on the empty space on the shelf, he let out an undignified squeak of excitement and didn’t even *care*. “We get to look at the compass?” he blurted, holding back the urge to bounce by sheer will alone.

Lan Wangji gave him a level look that somehow managed to be chiding and tolerantly amused at the same time. “The compass was not invented until the Song,” he said, following Lan Xichen as he started towards the door leading to the conservatory areas.

Wen Yuan folded his hands in front of him, deliberately projecting scholarly dignity and not grinning. “It’s marked with the cardinal directions. It has a needle designed to move freely. What else would it be?”

Lan Wangji did not blink. “It was likely intended to serve a ritual or divinatory purpose,” he said calmly, not so much as a twitch to betray that he was perfectly aware of the running joke that *ritual* stood for *we have no idea*.

“It *is* one of the oldest of the artifacts,” Lan Xichen noted. “Perhaps Wei Wuxian can provide some insight into its origins?”

Oh, *wow*. That would be—

Wen Yuan turned to Wei Wuxian eagerly… and then flushed with embarrassment when the man simply blinked and then raised an eyebrow with a crooked smile. Right. He’d been doing so *well* that Wen Yuan sometimes forgot that modern Mandarin was a *foreign language* to Wei Wuxian. Generally he could manage basic conversation with just a little stumbling, which frankly was *incredible* progress, but if he lost the thread of the conversation it was hard for him to pick it back up, especially if he didn’t have any context to rely on. Normally it wasn’t a problem because it was the three of them talking together – but Wen Yuan had gotten distracted and forgotten that Wei Wuxian wouldn’t even *know* words like compass or conservation.

Chagrined, Wen Yuan opened his mouth to apologize for leaving him out like that, but before he could speak, Wei Wuxian grinned and waved a hand. “There is an argument?” he asked, showing that he had at least followed the general gist of the conversation.

Wen Yuan hesitated. “Um… sort of? It’s just, people found something really cool in the old collection. But no one knows what it *is*, so…”

Wei Wuxian snorted, openly amused. “So there is an argument,” he said knowingly. “And everyone who has a guess, believes that they *know*, and everyone else is so wrong. Correct?”

Lan Xichen laughed as he opened the door to the conservation lab. “I must admit, that is an accurate description,” he said with a smile.

Wen Yuan huffed, but he did have to agree. When it came to the Suzhou Compass – and that was literally what it was called in the literature, it wasn’t just him! – he really understood Director Lan’s grumbling about the limitations of unique finds. There was no historic context except that it had been stored in the vault of the original monastery, there were no other items to compare it to, and so literally any likely story that people could dream up could be touted as the Real and Proper interpretation and no one could prove otherwise.

Except. The minute Wei Wuxian’s eyes landed on the palm-sized disc of metal with its strange engravings, he *choked*, actually grabbing Lan Wangji’s shoulder to stabilize himself through a brief coughing fit. “Why is *that* here?” he demanded.

“You know what it is?” Wen Yuan blurted. Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen were both wide-eyed.

Wei Wuxian huffed a laugh and straightened. “Ah… yes,” he said, sounding oddly amused.

Then he stepped forward and picked the compass up.

Lan Xichen stiffened. “Now, see here,” he said sternly, as Wen Yuan mentally slapped himself. Of course, they hadn’t been planning on going into the collections, they’d only warned Wei Wuxian about not touching the *cases* and the things on display…!

Ignoring them, Wei Wuxian twisted his hands, and the *back of the disc came off*, oh *no*—

Then he turned it to show the underside of the case. And the familiar characters inscribed as a maker’s mark.

“I do know it,” he said wryly.

Wen Yuan’s eyes were bugging out and he let them. Because.

“You *made* it?” he squeaked.

Wei Wuxian smiled. “I did! I gave this to Lan Yi, after the war.” He tilted his head, studying the compass in his hands with an odd, complicated sort of smile. Which… well, *yeah*.

“Would you like it back?” Lan Wangji asked quietly.

Lan Xichen spluttered. “Wangji! That is part of the core collection! We can’t just give it away!” He looked at Wei Wuxian, openly flustered. “I do understand that it once belonged to you…”

Wei Wuxian laughed, clicking the cover back into place with an easy, practiced motion and setting it back onto the table. “I gave it as a gift!” he corrected cheerfully. “It belonged to Lan Yi. Now it belongs to you.” He looked at the compass, pursing his lips for a moment, and then added ruefully, “And it was… hm. A first trying? It was new. An *invention*!” He grinned and winked at Wen Yuan – probably because he’d learned that word from the book of great inventions – and then shrugged. “The… thinking?... was not finished yet.”

“It was a prototype?” Lan Xichen asked.

“That’s… a thing that you make when you have an idea, but you aren’t sure how to make it really work yet,” Wen Yuan explained when Wei Wuxian glanced at him. “So you make just one to see if it works and to figure out if you can do it better.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, snapping his fingers. “That! Yes, exactly.” He smiled ruefully. “I wanted to finish it, but…” A wry gesture indicated Wei Wuxian himself, the lab, and the whole *frozen for fifteen hundred years* mess.

Ouch. Although that did explain why no one had found any other examples. “So… what is it for?” Wen Yuan asked, almost vibrating with anticipation. Because people had been arguing over the compass for *fifty years*. And here was the person who’d made it in the first place!

And Wei Wuxian was a *cultivator*. Did that mean the compass was a cultivation tool?

Wei Wuxian tapped his chin, humming thoughtfully. “It is… to find,” he said after a moment. Then he reached out and held his hand over the compass.

The engraved characters on the metal disc *shimmered*. Then three of them glowed red, and the needle – the *magnetically inert* needle that never responded to anything and seemed to serve no practical purpose – suddenly snapped around to point unwaveringly at one wall.

Lan Xichen made a strangled sort of sound, which… come to think of it, he’d never seen Wei Wuxian actually *do* anything openly, well, supernatural. He’d caught the bullet, but it had happened so *fast* – and then for the sword incident, Wei Wuxian hadn’t actually been present. Lan Xichen hadn’t actually *seen* Wei Wuxian *standing* on a flying sword, or… well, anything.

Mostly, though, Wen Yuan was busy gaping, because… “It moved!”

Wei Wuxian was looking at the compass, brow furrowed. “It did,” he said thoughtfully. “That was…” He looked at the wall the needle was pointing at, lips pursed. “What is that way?”

Wen Yuan hesitated, mind going blank. He felt like he *should* know the answer to that, but he was having trouble switching his spatial image of the collections from three-dimensional hallways and rooms to a bird’s eye view of the layout…

Lan Xichen stepped over to the door and looked at the fire escape map posted there. “I believe that would be the oracle bone collection,” he said.

Lan Wangji looked at Wei Wuxian, who was frowning at the compass again. “What does it find?”

“I called it a fēng xié pán. It finds… energy,” Wei Wuxian answered, and then, more ominously, “Energy that is dangerous.” He eyed Lan Xichen. “Oracle bone?”

“Bones used as divination tools – used to ask questions about the future,” Lan Wangji said. “You might be familiar with them as lóng gǔ.”

Wei Wuxian *blanched*.

“Long gu,” he repeated slowly. “You have collected *long gu*.” He drew in a slow breath and seemed to brace himself. “Did you make a ward?”

Um. That didn’t sound good.

Wei Wuxian looked at their faces and then nodded sharply, as if their expressions were an answer in themselves. “Show me,” he said briskly, turning away from the table. Grey eyes were sharp and serious, and Wen Yuan swallowed a gulp; if Wei Wuxian had looked like that after Jin Zixun tried to take his things, then no wonder Nie Mingjue had pushed so hard to come up with a solution stat!

“Ah… What about…?” Lan Xichen waved a hand at the compass, the characters still glowing an eerie red.

Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder and shrugged. “It will stop soon,” he said, with a wry smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That was a reason why the thinking was not finished. It was not useful if only a cultivator could use it!”

He looked at Lan Wangji, who nodded silently and then opening the door, beckoning them with a small gesture to follow.

Wen Yuan hurried after the two; he wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but he knew he didn’t want to miss it! Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lan Xichen shaking his head with a somewhat perplexed expression, but he followed gamely in their wake as Lan Wangji led them down the hallway to the next door, and stepped forward to unlock it without being asked.

Wen Yuan had to admit, the rows of heavy, shallow-shelved metal cabinets that lined walls from floor to ceiling did give the room an oppressive air. His overactive imagination wanted to call it *stifling*, even though if anything it was even colder than the rest of the archives…

Wei Wuxian’s hand snapped out, grabbing Lan Wangji’s wrist before he could reach for the handle of the nearest cabinet. “Do not,” he said firmly.

“Surely that’s not necessary?” Lan Xichen objected – although his voice wasn’t certain at all. “The collection has been here for decades, we would have noticed by now if there were something… problematic about it.”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. Then he pursed his lips and *whistled*, low and sharp and—

*Ohshitwhatis*that*?!*

Something black and grasping and terrible *boiled* out of the cabinets, a dark cloud that choked the room – even as Wen Yuan’s eyes *swore* there wasn’t anything *there* and the room was just as bright and as empty as it had been only a second ago. Wen Yuan stumbled back an unintentional step completely by reflex. Then Lan Wangji was sweeping him back behind them, even as the professor retreated a few careful steps so that he was standing at Wei

Wuxian's shoulder, out of the way in case the cultivator needed to act quickly but far enough forward to shield Wen Yuan and Lan Xichen.

"Yuàn qi," Wei Wuxian said, sounding terrifyingly nonchalant as he tilted his head and studied the mass of not-there *darkness*. "It is… hm. Energy that could not *move* and became… not correct. The bones used qi, to… predict? …what was asked. Then the ones who used them could not… Hm. Wash? …the qi. So it was put in the ground."

The invisible dark roiled, seeming to reach out towards them. Wei Wuxian eyed it and whistled again, higher in pitch this time, and the dark recoiled as if physically shoved back.

Chángxiào, Wen Yuan thought distantly. He'd read a bit about transcendental whistling, once. Apparently the part about it controlling the dead was at least kind of true.

And if he was thinking about that in a desperate effort to *not panic*, he didn't think anyone could blame him!

Lan Wangji exhaled slowly. "So when they were gathered together…"

Wei Wuxian huffed. "One or two? That is not a large danger. But put together? They…" He hesitated, frowning, and made a sort of shaking motion with his extended hand. "They are… like two guqin together. You play the string of one. The other one moves."

Wait. Not shaking. *Vibrating*. "They resonate," Wen Yuan supplied, and gulped. "So, the oracle bones… make each other stronger?"

Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly. "When many people are angry together, they do not become *less* angry."

Um. Yeah. And also yikes, because he'd *seen* the oracle bone collection and there were a *lot* more than just one or two!

Lan Wangji studied the energy in the room, face as calm as ever and only a subtle tightness around his eyes to betray his own reaction. "You said that the bones could not be cleansed. But you controlled it just now."

Wei Wuxian grinned brightly and tapped the side of his nose. "Ah. Well! Cultivation is like science. People learn new things!"

He studied the energy a moment longer, head cocked to the side as if listening for something very faint. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper, oddly long and weirdly *thick*, like fancy handmade stuff—

Talisman paper. That's actual talisman paper*, he must have had some with him when he froze…*

Holding the paper against the frame of the door, Wei Wuxian pulled out something that looked almost like a rust-red piece of chalk – *um, wait, is that cinnabar?* – and quickly… drew? wrote?… a complex set of symbols and lines, something that made the ward talisman he'd shown Wen Yuan look *simple*—

Then, turning to face the room again, Wei Wuxian held up a hand, palm flat, and *pushed*.

The talisman stiffened, then flew forward to smack down in the center of the work table in the middle of the room like an iron filing to a magnet. For just a moment, it flashed red, and then…

It was almost like watching a drop of ink falling into water, except in reverse. Or maybe a better analogy would be vapor from a fog machine being sucked away by vents. The dark energy pulled back from the talisman, seeming to fold in on itself and back into the cabinets.

Wen Yuan released a very wobbly exhale, only at that moment realizing that he'd been holding his breath the whole time.

Then Wei Wuxian turned around, flapping his hands playfully at them. "So!" he said brightly, chivvying them out of the room. "That is done! But it is better to not stay." Closing the door behind them, he pulled out another talisman – this one pre-made, apparently – and placed it on the door, where it stuck despite the lack of any sort of adhesive.

Then he looked at Wen Yuan and grinned. "Warmer?"

"…Yes!" Wen Yuan said, startled. He'd been so distracted that he hadn't noticed – which, seriously, *so justified* – but the moment that not-there *dark* had pulled back, the extra chill in the archives had as well. Now… well, it was definitely still chilly, but at least he wasn't actually on the verge of shivering anymore.

Wei Wuxian nodded. "That is good! A cold that is not right – that means yuan qi is taking *your* qi. That is not good!"

Erk. Well, that was *terrifying*, considering that the archives had always felt kind of creepily cold to him, if never quite this bad before.

Lan Xichen swallowed. "I… didn't notice it," he said slowly. Looking at him, Wen Yuan felt a surge of sympathy. The man was starkly pale, the line of his mouth unsteady and his eyes distinctly wild even as he was obviously trying to remain calm. At least Wen Yuan had gotten a few days of watching Wei Wuxian doing *cool* stuff before all of this!

Wei Wuxian nodded. "Wen Yuan is… new? Not big?" he started, and then had the nerve to *smirk* when Wen Yuan made a noise in protest – he was not *short*, he just wasn't done growing! – before turning back to Lan Xichen. "His jīngmài, his qi paths – they are more open. They feel more."

"Is he hurt?" Lan Wangji asked, standing close by Wen Yuan's shoulder as he gulped.

"Hmmm." Wei Wuxian made a grabby motion at Wen Yuan's left arm. When Wen Yuan obligingly extended it, Wei Wuxian turned his hand over and then held two fingers just over the pulse point of the wrist, humming thoughtfully.

Then he grinned, reaching out to tap Wen Yuan on the nose. "Sleeping will be good! But you are not big, you bounce!"

“What of adults?” Lan Wangji asked, and Wen Yuan bit back his spluttering to listen.

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully, swaying his whole upper body back and forth in a nonverbal sort of “maybe.” “If not much, and not… Mmm. Many times fast? That is not bad. But if more…” He grimaced.

“I don’t understand,” Lan Xichen said weakly. “There’s never been a problem…”

Wei Wuxian chuckled and patted the wall. “This place, there are old wards! They keep the yuan qi from leaving. But it can *come*.” He looked at the talisman on the door. “That will help. But it is not a fixing. And… cleansing?” He glanced at Lan Wangji, then continued when a nod confirmed that he had used the term correctly. “I can do that. But it will take preparing.”

“And in the meantime,” Lan Wangji said, with a grim edge, “we should investigate what the long-term outcomes for the collection’s curators has been in the past decades.”

LEXICON

Lóng gǔ (龍骨): “dragon bones,” which is what oracle bones were called in traditional medicine.

Fēng xié pán (风邪盘): the Compass of Ill Winds/Compass of Evil.

Yuàn qì (怨气): resentful energy. I think. It took some digging to find! As an aside, for Japanese anime fans, the character for *yuan* is the same as the *on* in *onryou* aka angry ghosts; in Japanese it tends to mean *wrath*. I found that interesting, although I’d already suspected as much.

Jīngmài (经脉): qi meridians.

Chángxiào (長嘯): typically translated “transcendental whistling” – see the main notes for details!

NOTES

As part of my research for this fic (and in the name of being a geek), I managed to grab a used copy of *Chinese Medicine and Healing: An Illustrated History* by T.J. Hinrichs and Linda L. Barnes (which, by the by, is also a great look at some of the folkloric concepts underlying Chinese ideas of magic and the supernatural, since that tends to deal with healing). And right in the first pages was a discussion of oracle bones being used to diagnose and treat illnesses… and a mention that the used bones and shells were then buried, because the energy they absorbed in the process made them dangerous.

Me: “Oh man, that would be a perfect problem for cultivators…”

And then I came up with Wei Wuxian’s original compass being stashed away in the Lan vaults, and my plotbunnies tapped me on shoulder and said, “Hey, if the university is big on history and archaeology, they’d probably have a stash of oracle bones…”

Fun aside, one of my major stumbling blocks that I hit especially hard in this chapter was how to clarify cultivation as it appears in xianxia – as what Western culture would classify as a magical system – versus cultivation as the continuous improvement of body and personal character as practiced historically and *to this day* in Chinese (and East Asian more generally) culture. I thought about hunting the actual Chinese term down and using that as a way to differentiate, but ultimately I opted against that, because the whole point is that they’re *not* actually supposed to be separate, so much as the form seen in xianxia is the historic version of cultivation taken to the level of legends and even mythology. And that seemed much more fun to play with. But it did mean I spent a while coming up with ways to refer to cultivation as seen in MDZS and real-world practices!

(It also doesn’t help that a lot of the philosophical and religious customs and practices that form the underpinnings of fantasy cultivation were generally just getting established in the disunified/Northern and Southern Dynasties period! So I’m definitely playing fast and loose with history in this…)

Speaking of. Transcendental whistling was an actual Daoist practice – in fact, whistling was considered a musical instrument of sorts, with whistlers included in orchestras! And yes, one of the powers attributed to it was *raising and controlling the dead*. Kind of cool to see where that aspect of Wei Wuxian’s guidao came from!

Also, huzzah, I finally found a way to establish *Lan Zhan* as a name! Granted, I made it harder for myself because I wanted to stick with courtesy names no longer being part of the culture, but I *also* wanted to keep the whole Wei Ying/Lan Zhan naming thing. So Lan Wangji had to be his regular name, and thus Lan *Zhan* needed a separate origin. (There will be no Hanguang-jun title. The scale of the story is too small for that.)

When I wrote the scene with Lan Xichen, I was thinking about the specific circumstances of this fic, because yes – after spending so much time thinking of “Yiling Laozu” as an inanimate object (a project like the one I posit here would have been months and even years in planning before they actually started), there would be some *severe* cognitive dissonance in meeting an active man who has a personality and opinions and has to be *interacted* with, especially since Lan Xichen has been at a remove the entire time (and interacting extensively with people who *also* think of Yiling Laozu rather than Wei Wuxian, for various reasons). But after writing it, it did occur to me that “Lan Xichen doesn’t quite register Wei Wuxian as *a person*” actually fits canon pretty well – and would explain some of Lan Xichen’s behavior.

After all, they only interacted directly twice in canon before Wei Wuxian’s death, both relatively superficial encounters during the Cloud Recesses arc. He didn’t *know* Wei Wuxian, and so he didn’t feel any need to question the rumors. Especially when “Wei Wuxian as bad guy” was so useful for the people who were more important (more emotionally “real”) to him. I’m not saying this was conscious in any way – Lan Xichen would never *deliberately* do

that. It was just… easy to go along and only make cursory noises of concern. Wei Wuxian simply didn't matter enough to look deeper.

(And then he discovers that, oops, it turns out that his brother cares *very much* about Wei Wuxian, and Lan Xichen does not take it well at all.)

Actually, I rather like the way withthewindinherfootsteps summed up Lan Xichen at one point: he is not a bad person. But he is *deeply* unwilling to go outside his comfort zone. So to me… he wants to be good, but because he's not willing to do the hard confrontations that *good* demands, he tends to sideslip into *nice*. Nice, mind, is not a bad thing… but it's a *superficial* thing.

The thing is… I actually think this aspect of Lan Xichen – that he genuinely tries to be good, but due to bias and classism and personal partiality tends to fail to follow through – is actually really important to the themes of the novel. It's one thing to confront the banality of evil in the form of characters like Sect Leader Yao; we all know about pretentious blowhards who are none-too-bright! But Lan Xichen is an uncomfortable reminder that intelligent, *nice* people who genuinely want to do good are just as susceptible.

Fun aside, that wall of rules is part of why I see Cloud Recesses as modeled on (actually close to satirizing) a Buddhist monastery (along with, you know, the Lan An backstory, the segregation of the sexes, the overall ascetic aesthetic). There's a long tradition of extensive rules dictating every aspect of a monk's life (and not restricted to Buddhism; see the Rule of Saint Benedict), and during the disunified period in China, there was a positive obsession with importing The *Right* Rules from India. Given Lan Yi's story, though, I can definitely see her being less than enthused.

Meanwhile, Confucius – Master Kong – had *opinions* about trying to dictate moral conduct using rules and punishments. The Lan wall of rules would have given him a conniption…

Also, I can't help finding it ironic that the Lan setup would work far better in a more genre-typical cultivation sect, where membership – like in actual monasteries – is entirely voluntary. That sort of society gets a lot more problematic when you don't have a self-selected population!

(As an aside: my headcanon is that the wall of rules was destroyed by a combination of erosion, neglect, and damage inflicted during one of the many, many purges enacted on Buddhists at various points in Chinese history. The Doylist explanation, however, is that the wall of rules would have given the "wait, this is Cloud Recesses" game away far too easily, and my plot bunnies had their hearts set on that Cold Springs scene. So the wall had to go!)

The Gongche system of musical notation was indeed only created in the Tang period, but as I mentioned previously: since the plot bunnies were set on the idea of Lan Wangji raising Wei Wuxian's suspicions by playing *Wangxian* (in a deliberate echo of canon), I needed to bend things so that there was in fact a written notation system prior to that. (And a bit of artistic license on top of that; since the Gongche system was more like the modern fake book, giving chords rather than melodies, technically there should have been no way for Lan Wangji to accurately reproduce the song!)

Chapter 11: Implications

Chapter Summary

Resentful energy exists. This is a problem.

"In the long term? Any curator who spent at least five years running that collection has only lived fifteen years beyond their date of hire. At best."

Wen Qing was proud, in a distant sort of way, that her words came out brisk and professional – nothing to betray the cold knot of horror that had been building in her gut ever since the first few responses to the inquiries she'd made over the past week had started to come trickling in.

Lan Xichen was white-faced as he slowly paged through the report she'd handed out a moment ago, summarizing her findings. He'd offered to absent himself from the meeting, per their agreement on PR management. Wen Qing had insisted on his presence. This was not only a matter of the Yiling Laozu project anymore; this was an environmental hazard that had been *killing people* for decades – centuries! – and *no one had noticed*.

Horror, Wen Qing thought, was not nearly strong enough a word.

Lan Qiren closed the report and rested his clasped hands on it. His knuckles were tight and his lips almost bloodless, but otherwise the man projected an admirable appearance of calm. "What is the direct cause of the mortality rate?"

"That's the scary part," Wen Qing said bluntly. "There *is* no single cause of death. Nor can I identify anything that suggests a common underlying cause. Some died of illness, some from misadventure, two suicides… one person was hit by a bus!" She shook her head. "Looking at these statistics as a physician, I would tell you that there's nothing linking them… except for the fact that there is a clear correlation between mortality rate and the amount of time they spent working in those collections."

And that would be the part that took the situation from horrifying to *terrifying*. She was familiar with ailments arising from environmental factors that could manifest in a wide range of health complications, but how did you treat something that seemed to manifest, at its core, as *bad luck*?

How did you even convince people that it *was* the problem?

She could see Lan Qiren's own reluctance, even as he opened his copy of the report to once again review the graphics and statistics she had put together. But one blessing of the situation: if Lan Qiren believed in anything, it was cold, hard data. After a long minute, he

closed the report again and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, obviously attempting to stave off a stress headache.

Then he raised his head and straightened his shoulders with a sigh. “Obviously a more general and comprehensive study will need to be done to verify these findings… but I agree, these results are deeply concerning, Doctor Wen. If true, this is a matter of concern for *all* institutions that currently host archaeological collections.”

She’d been trying not to think about that. The Cloud Recesses archives were relatively small, as such things went. And Wen Qing highly doubted that the oracle bones were the only artifacts that held accumulated “resentful energy.”

She was also trying not to think about how many oracle bones had been ground up as *medical treatment* over the centuries. Yes, some medicines were also poisons… but sometimes poison was just *poison*.

“For the time being,” she said, deliberately turning away from those dark thoughts, “we should make the oracle bone collection off-limits, and ask Wei Wuxian if more permanent containment measures are available. In the long term…” She turned to Lan Wangji, who had been sitting quietly by and listening thus far.

“He has indicated that treatment for exposure is possible,” he said. “He would like to consult with you regarding Wen Yuan.”

She nodded briskly; they had already discussed that privately, since her young cousin openly admitted that he was hoping for actual cultivation lessons. She *definitely* wanted a better grasp on the medical side of cultivation before she gave any blessings on that front.

“He also believes that decontamination of the afflicted artifacts is possible without harming their historic value,” Lan Wangji continued. “However, it will require planning and preparation.”

“More importantly, it means that we will be effectively hiring him as an expert consultant in university matters,” Wen Qing added. “Not to mention that there’s no way we can present our information about this health risk to other institutions without explaining Wei Wuxian. If we’re going to make him an active participant, then Nie Huaisang was right; it’s time that you sat down with him and *officially* explained why he’s here, Director.”

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, but then nodded and looked at Lan Wangji. “In that case, I shall make myself available tomorrow afternoon. Inform me of your preferred time and place when you have consulted with him.”

Only the slightest of hesitations betrayed Lan Wangji’s surprise before he tilted his head in acceptance. And Wen Qing had to admit, it wasn’t a bad plan. It gave all parties involved a reasonable amount of time to prepare, with minimal risk of stalling or unforeseen delays. And she was fairly sure that Lan Wangji had been coaching Wei Wuxian on etiquette since Nie Huaisang had first brought the suggestion up.

“In the meantime,” Lan Qiren said, turning back to Lan Xichen, “regarding the need for new safety protocols…”

Wen Qing settled back in her chair. There wasn’t much more she could contribute to the conversation at this point, since they currently lacked information regarding degree of exposure or necessary recovery time. Her role, at this point, was to make note of the relevant medical information they lacked, so that she could consult with Wei Wuxian later.

And she *would* be doing so. Especially regarding treatment. Because this was an ailment that had apparently gone unnoticed for decades, if not centuries, and that was *not acceptable*. And if doing something about it meant inventing a whole new field of medicine from scratch – or reviving one that had been lost for a thousand years…?

Well. She’d always liked a challenge.

“Wangji!”

Lan Wangji hesitated in the doorway and looked back over his shoulder as Lan Xichen hurried down the hall to catch up with him.

“Sorry,” his brother said with a smile as he joined Lan Wangji. “I just wanted to ask if you had a minute.”

Lan Wangji’s steps slowed for a moment as the door swung closed behind them. Had something come up after he’d left the meeting…?

Lan Xichen chuckled, waving a hand. “It’s nothing urgent!” he said reassuringly. “It’s just that with everything that’s been happening with the project, I feel like we barely see each other anymore! And we didn’t really get to talk back at the museum. I just wanted to see if you had some time to catch up for a bit.”

True. Normally he and his brother would meet at least once a week, to catch up on the projects they were working on and anything else going on in their lives. But between seeing each other regularly with the Yiling Laozu project, and then Wei Wuxian’s unexpected awakening and everything that had happened since, those meetings had fallen by the wayside for a while.

Lan Wangji paused to consider. Part of him itched to return to the Jingshi and begin the preparations for Lan Qiren’s visit; he could not help but be acutely aware of how important it was that Lan Qiren’s introduction to Wei Wuxian go well, for multiple reasons…

But it was still relatively early in the morning. Wei Wuxian was likely to still be asleep, and there was no reason to disturb the routine of the morning. Wen Yuan was aware of the new plans; Lan Wangji had already notified him of the upcoming meeting. He had time.

“A moment,” he said, and pulled out his phone to send a text to Wen Yuan, informing him that Lan Wangji would be returning slightly later than initially planned. Then he pocketed his phone again and nodded to his brother, who beamed as they began walking again.

It was pleasant to simply stroll the paths of the campus in silence together. Unlike many of Lan Wangji's acquaintance, his brother had never been troubled by his default of silence. Something that he had relied upon probably more than he should have as a child, to his detriment during his years as a student and then as a scholar. He'd vastly underestimated how very *social* – and political – the academic world truly could be.

He was better at handling such things now. But it was still pleasant to walk with someone who did not mind silence.

Perhaps that was part of what made Wei Wuxian's company pleasant. For all his cheerful talk, Wei Wuxian never seemed to mind Lan Wangji's reticence, either.

Still. Lan Xichen had said he wanted to catch up. And… Lan Wangji had been concerned. So, as they followed one of the gracefully winding path, well away from the few students still on campus and about at this hour, he asked, "You are well?"

Lan Xichen sighed. "It does sting a bit," he admitted. "If only because I know that Nie Huaisang is right… and that I really only have myself to blame. I made a mistake that could have had profound consequences. And it will make things difficult moving forward. A little bruised pride is a small price to pay for mitigating that." He chuckled. "Besides, I am still involved with the project in a way, since I'm working with Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao on the Su Minshan situation."

Lan Wangji stiffened. "I thought he had been arrested and handed to the police."

"Ah." Lan Xichen hesitated, then sighed. "Well. I suppose I might as well tell you now, Nie Mingjue will give the official report this afternoon. Someone posted bail for him."

Lan Wangji's footsteps paused for a moment as he processed that. "…Someone."

Lan Xichen nodded grimly. "I admit… I thought – I hoped – that we were simply being overly cautious. But an anonymous donor apparently provided the funds for Su Minshan to post bail… and since then, he seems to have vanished." His cheeks puffed with frustration. "Nie Mingjue and I have been attempting to impress on the police the importance of finding him, but that is proving rather difficult, given that his actions involve someone who does not yet legally *exist*."

"He shot at Wen Yuan," Lan Wangji snapped, forcing the words through gritted teeth and frozen lungs.

Lan Xichen shook his head. "And we have clear video evidence of him doing so… but we cannot *release* that evidence without also revealing the situation with Wei Wuxian." He looked at Lan Wangji. "If it's any comfort, Meng Yao is quite confident that Su Minshan will not speak of the project to anyone. He will not want to be taken for a madman."

Lan Wangji stared at him flatly, and Lan Xichen winced slightly before sighing.

Because Su Minshan had fired a lethal weapon at a minor. He should not have been *eligible* for bail. The fact that he had been able to pay and walk at all meant that either someone's

palms had been liberally greased, or a great deal of pressure had been put on the officers. And neither of those were things that Su Minshan, a mediocre security guard with no connections, could do on his own.

Which meant someone else had intervened. Someone with money, power or influence. More likely, someone with all three, given that they tended to come as a set.

And there were only so many reasons why *Su Minshan* would be of interest to such a person.

Seething, Lan Wangji was caught completely off guard when Lan Xichen suddenly laughed.

At Lan Wangji's blank stare, Lan Xichen quickly schooled his face back to solemnity. "I'm sorry," he said, the corners of his mouth still twitching suspiciously. "I know it's a very serious situation. But I don't think I've ever seen you so *protective* of someone since Wen Yuan was small and getting picked on by those bullies. I think meeting Wei Wuxian has been good for you."

Lan Wangji did not stiffen, even as the back of his neck tensed. Because no. Absolutely not. He was *not* going to have this conversation with his nosy and far too often inclined to meddle brother. "I am responsible for his well-being," he said shortly.

Lan Xichen smiled knowingly. "So *responsibility* is why you two were so close at the museum? It's not like you to discuss childhood dreams out of responsibility."

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes, glowering. So Xichen *had* eavesdropped on that conversation. Which… wasn't that unreasonable, if he was inclined to be charitable. To Lan Xichen, Wei Wuxian was an enigma. An impossibility. An existence that upended what had been a comfortable and predictable rhythm. Of course he would want to watch the man.

Lan Wangji was not inclined to be charitable. That had been a private conversation!

And his brother just laughed indulgently at his irritation, patting him on the shoulder. "Really, there's nothing to be embarrassed about!" he said cheerfully. "Even I can recognize that he's a very attractive man! And he *does* seem quite fond of you. Perhaps you should…"

That… actually stung. "Brother. *Stop*."

Lan Xichen started to laugh again – then hesitated, giving Lan Wangji a searching look. "Oh," he murmured, hesitant in a way he rarely was between the two of them. "You're… angry?"

He was. On multiple levels. Lan Wangji allowed himself a moment to breathe deeply, steadying himself. This was hardly the first time his brother had pried into his relationships, or more precisely his lack thereof. He did not *like* such prying, but he had learned to tolerate it to a degree. But in this case… "You are doing it again."

Lan Xichen's brows furrowed. "I understand that you prefer not to talk about relationships, but…"

“Not that.” Not that that was not *also* true, but… “Brother. For two weeks, I was the only person Wei Wuxian interacted with. As things stand, I am still his primary source of human contact, and he is dependent on me for anything beyond the most basic communication, particularly when it comes to any sort of information about the modern world.”

Not to mention basic necessities like *food, clothing and shelter*.

Lan Wangji fixed his brother with a hard stare. “It would be *beyond* unethical for me to pursue a relationship with him under the current circumstances. Particularly when I am acting as his advocate in the project.” Specifically to *prevent* people from exploiting him, no less!

Lan Xichen opened his mouth. “…ah,” he said after a moment, wincing with chagrin. “You’re right, of course. I hadn’t really thought about it in those terms.”

No, because once again he’d been thinking of Wei Wuxian as an object, rather than a person with his own thoughts, needs and wishes. But Lan Wangji held those words back; there was no reason to belabor the point further.

Lan Xichen sighed. “I just… want you to be happy. You seemed to be, with him.”

Well. Perhaps he should belabor the point a little. “Then consider that it would not make me happy to enter a relationship that might well be based on Stockholm syndrome,” he said dryly.

He regretted it a little when Lan Xichen winced again, more deeply this time.

Lan Wangji sighed. He knew that it could have been so much worse; he was well aware that Wen Yuan’s friend Mo Xuanyu lived very *rightly* in terror of his mother’s family learning of his sexuality. Lan Wangji knew he was fortunate; for all their other issues, he had never once been afraid that his family would reject him for his inclinations, despite the very real potential consequences should those inclinations be widely known.

The problem was that his brother… did not quite seem to understand that a physical attraction to men was *not* the same thing as an active desire for a relationship, or to be dating. This was far from the first time that Lan Xichen had attempted to encourage Lan Wangji in a relationship that he had no intentions of pursuing.

The fact that this time Lan Wangji actually *wouldn’t* be opposed if not for the circumstances… just made it more frustrating, really. And he was not going to follow that line of thought any further.

…Except that Lan Xichen was apparently not quite ready to let it go. “But in the future, perhaps…?” he suggested hopefully.

Lan Wangji sighed. “Perhaps,” he said reluctantly; clearly he would not get out of this without *some* concession to his brother’s prying. “But it would only be ethical to explore *after* Wei Wuxian has had the opportunity to establish a life for himself independent of the project and no longer needs my assistance.”

And he would not be taking opinions from the part of his mind that was attempting to provide suggestions about what such a life might look like. It was *not helping*.

Lan Xichen sighed. “I suppose you’re right,” he admitted. “We’ll just have to hope that tomorrow’s meeting goes well, I suppose; that is the first step.”

Lan Wangji quickly seized the chance to change the topic. “I have been considering the best way to arrange the meeting. I would appreciate your insight…”

If Wen Yuan was going to be really, totally honest, Lan Qiren intimidated him.

Which was a statement that would completely *stun* Lan Jingyi, because despite actually being *related* to Director Lan, Lan Jingyi was terrified of the man. Wen Yuan vividly remembered the time that Lan Qiren had come looking for Lan Wangji when the professor had been showing him and his friends a new exhibit, and Lan Jingyi had spent the rest of the trip clinging to Wen Yuan and complaining about, “one look and my bones froze!” and “you’re *so lucky* he likes you!”

The worst part was, Lan Qiren *did* like him, Wen Yuan knew he did… and that just made the director even more intimidating, because his approval came with *expectations* and Wen Yuan was always worried about whether he’d actually measure up.

So he was perfectly happy to stay seated on his cushion safely out of the way and watch from the sidelines as Lan Wangji poured the tea for himself, Lan Qiren, and Wei Wuxian.

It was… really *interesting* to see Lan Qiren and Wei Wuxian seated across from each other. Lan Qiren wore pressed slacks and a perfectly buttoned shirt and tie under a light suit jacket; the very image of academic professionalism.

The contrast couldn’t have been more striking between that and the traditional robes Wei Wuxian was wearing. Not his original robes – those were tucked away for safekeeping. But they’d managed to acquire clothes made in the old style, using traditional materials.

Made in the *specific* style of Wei Wuxian’s clothes, because it turned out that the artist had actually gotten permission to come and *study* Wei Wuxian when he’d still been frozen in the ice, before the decision to thaw him was made, and there’d been a whole section of the website talking about the artist’s observations and how they’d combined that with historical research and similar clothing styles in art and surviving fragments from tombs to produce the most authentic recreation of Yiling Laozu’s clothing as possible.

It had really been an amazing piece of scholarship. Wen Yuan had been deeply impressed, even if he’d been laughing more than a little hysterically at the thought of how the artist would react if they knew that one of their customers had ordered a set *for the actual Yiling Laozu*.

He’d worried when Wei Wuxian had changed into those robes after lunch. He did understand the importance of wearing comfortable clothing in a stressful situation, but it would be so

easy for Lan Qiren to look at him and see someone from the distant past who *of course* must be ignorant and uneducated by modern standards—

Watching them now, he realized that Wei Wuxian had actually planned his appearance strategically. He was meeting Lan Qiren as a professional to another professional, each of them an expert in his own field.

Lan Wangji set the teapot aside and settled at the table, all graceful dignity, and Wen Yuan had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as he remembered the way Wei Wuxian had teased the professor about being the junior at a table of old men – after all, Wei Wuxian was a venerable fifteen hundred years old, going on twenty-two!

Wen Yuan was just glad that it was Lan Wangji and not *him* sitting at that table. They'd spent all of yesterday and this morning going over details of etiquette and expectations about proper behavior and… yikes. He knew that technically it was all stuff that he already knew, but after listening to all that he just *knew* that he'd have gotten self-conscious and screwed something up!

And that would have been bad, because this was going to be Lan Qiren's first actual meeting with Wei Wuxian and he knew it was *really, really* important that Lan Qiren have a good first impression of Wei Wuxian the person. Which wasn't really fair, because it was Lan Qiren and the Yiling Laozu Project that wanted something from Wei Wuxian, the burden of a good first impression really should have been on *him*…

But, well, Lan Qiren was the one with the power to influence whether other people would treat Wei Wuxian like a real person or not. So they needed him in Wei Wuxian's corner. It wasn't really *about* "fair."

Wen Yuan's lips twitched; he could just imagine how Ouyang Zizhen and Lan Jingyi would react to that idea. Jin Ling would get it, though.

So he stayed off to the side and tried not to fidget as Lan Qiren picked up his cup and sipped the tea with what felt like agonizing slowness.

Then he lowered it again, setting it on the table with a decisive sort of *click*. "You were discovered eight years ago frozen in a glacier on Mount Dafan in the Daba Mountains," he said briskly. "At the time, you were thought to be an exceptionally well-preserved corpse. Five years ago, you were brought here to Cloud Recesses for safekeeping and study."

Safekeeping and study, but not proper burial. That was… Wen Yuan hadn't really thought about it much, before – and he knew that there was no way they would have been *able* to bury him, not when just *thawing* Yiling Laozu had been so controversial. But now he wondered what Wei Wuxian thought about that, especially after what he'd implied about the tetchiness of unburied dead. Not to mention the level of pure disrespect implied.

He really doubted Wei Wuxian had missed that little detail, but he didn't react at all; just listened, gaze level and steady. The only hint of his thoughts was a tiny, wry quirk of a smile at one corner of his mouth, as if he found Lan Qiren's brusque bluntness amusing.

“Two years ago, we made the decision to remove you from the ice for closer study, in order to further our knowledge of your time of origin.” For just a second, Lan Qiren paused, lips pursed. “Obviously, our original plan is no longer viable.”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head, eyes laughing even as he said, “This one apologizes for the inconvenience of his survival.”

Oh wow. *Zing*. And Wen Yuan could *see* the zing hit home in the way Lan Qiren’s expression flashed quickly from annoyance to shock to sudden discomfort – as if it had only just sunk in that grousing about the inconvenience meant that he was complaining about the fact that Wei Wuxian *wasn’t dead*.

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian *had* to have planned that. Among other things, Wen Yuan was pretty sure that *inconvenience* was a new addition to Wei Wuxian’s vocabulary.

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. “So! Now that I am not dead, what do you plan to do?”

“Ah…” Lan Qiren cleared his throat, clearly nonplussed. Now that Wen Yuan thought about it, no one had just come out and *asked* that, had they? Lots of talk about needing to plan, but not a straightforward *what* is *the plan?* “…The goal of the project, and of the university, is to learn more about the past, and our ancestors,” he said after a moment. “You could provide great insight.” He cleared his throat again and straightened his shoulders. “However. I do recognize that you did not volunteer to be part of this project. We value what you can tell us, but you are not obligated to do so in any manner.”

“You are generous,” Wei Wuxian said lightly, and Wen Yuan could not for the life of him tell if the statement was sincere or skeptical. Or maybe a little sarcastic; *not obligated* was kind of a stretch, given the way things had gone that first week.

Lan Qiren made a dismissive motion with his hand. “As the ones who thawed you out of the ice, the project has an ethical responsibility to help you adjust to the modern era, as well.”

Wei Wuxian studied him, eyes sharp on Lan Qiren’s face. “Oh?” he asked, something knowing in his tone.

Lan Qiren hesitated for a moment, stroking his beard. “The project is… of great interest to many,” he admitted at last.

“Ah,” Wei Wuxian said, and smiled wryly. “And that I am not dead will be even more interesting.” He cocked his head to the side. “Do they know?” he asked, sounding more curious than anything else.

“We have not told anyone yet, no,” Lan Qiren admitted. “We felt it would be best to wait for a time.”

Wei Wuxian hummed, nodding. “How long a time?” he asked.

Lan Qiren hesitated again. Wen Yuan had to wonder – had the director actually thought about that yet? He knew Nie Huaisang had told the project something similar, about having an

actual timeline for releasing the news, but… well, he knew from riding herd on his friends' schoolwork that being told that something needed to be done didn't always translate to *doing* it in a timely manner.

Although his brain hurt a bit, associating Lan Qiren with Lan *Jingyi's* homework habits.

"There is also the question of what *you* want," Lan Wangji said into the pause – although from the glint in Wei Wuxian's eye as he continued to watch Lan Qiren's reaction, he'd definitely noticed the lack of a ready response. "You will be the one most affected when the wider world learns about you. You deserve a say in when and how it happens… and what you wish to do moving forward."

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji, still with that wry, knowing air, but warmer this time. "Do I know enough to want?" he asked.

Which was… well, ow. But a fair point.

Lan Qiren cleared his throat. "Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan can assist you in that; that is their role right now." Then he hesitated before adding, with visible reluctance, "And Nie Mingjue's younger brother has also offered his assistance, as he is more… familiar with certain aspects of modern society. There are… certain things that it would be best that you were familiar with."

Wei Wuxian looked *intrigued* by that, and Wen Yuan tried not to laugh. He hadn't met Nie Huaisang yet, but from what he had heard, the guy was interesting.

Wen Yuan did hope that he'd be able to sit in on the internet lessons, because to be honest, he was kind of looking forward to seeing what Wei Wuxian would do once he was unleashed on social media. He seemed the sort of guy who'd have *way* too much fun with that.

Wen Yuan was friends with Lan Jingyi, Ouyang Zizhen, and Jin Ling. He might not be the type to initiate chaos, but he was not above being on standby with an earnestly innocent face and alibis ready at hand.

Lan Qiren folded his hands neatly on the table. "On that topic, however, I would like to discuss the problem that you discovered in our collections," he said seriously. "If the artifacts are endangering the students and staff, then it is imperative that the problem be addressed immediately. In addition, Cloud Recesses is not the only archive of oracle bones. We have a responsibility to inform others of the potential dangers, and of any available methods of mitigation." He drew in a deep breath. "To my knowledge, you are… perhaps the only person who knows such things. Your assistance would be… greatly appreciated."

The look Wei Wuxian gave him this time was… different. *Sharp*. Assessing, somehow. As if something Lan Qiren had said had just… completely gone against whatever Wei Wuxian was expecting.

After a moment, though, he nodded. "There are ways. It will take time. The bones are *very* old. But I can help you."

Lan Qiren actually *bowed*. “We would be in your debt,” he said gravely.

Overall, the meeting with Master Lan had gone quite well, Wei Wuxian thought. The man was stuffy and stiff as any clan elder, but he did clearly take his responsibility to Cloud Recesses seriously. But by the time it was over, Wei Wuxian felt like he’d just been through one of the thornier strategy sessions during the Sunshot Campaign, navigating prickly tempers and even pricklier egos: mentally exhausted, even as his limbs vibrated with residual tension. This was definitely going to be a night dedicated to hard, focused physical training, to smooth out the knotted qi.

But that could wait until later, when his companions had gone to bed and wouldn’t be disturbed by his evening acrobatics. For now, he was quite content to sit on the veranda, the wood still warm from the sun, slowly running his comb through hair damp from an after-dinner shower as he watched twilight settle over the garden and basked in the bliss of *not thinking* for a while.

Really, hot showers were an absolutely *brilliant* creation. How had he survived all these years deprived of them?

Of course, that thought led to another that he’d been idly turning over in his mind for a while now.

“When you said that cultivators and cultivation were legends,” he said, still looking out at the garden as the gathering dusk grew deep enough to activate the small lamps scattered through the garden like lost stars – and oh, Shijie would have *loved* those. “You did not mean stories about people very far away. You meant *fiction*.”

He’d suspected as much, based on the way everyone he’d met had reacted to his sword skills and talismans. But he hadn’t been *sure*, and given that his grasp of the language was still at least half context and guesswork – hence the concentration headache still stubbornly lingering after the day’s meeting! – he hadn’t wanted to assume. But his conversation with Lan Wangji at the museum had certainly supported the possibility, and the utter lack of *any* kind of wards on the dragon bones, even the very basic sort that even common villagers might use, even more so.

But the conversation with Lan Qiren had clinched it for him. He was, after all, *very* familiar with the irritation of an elder forced to take what he had assumed to be nonsense seriously!

Lan Wangji’s hands didn’t so much as hesitate on the strings of his guqin. “Mn. Wen Yuan has one such book, if you wish to see an example.”

Wei Wuxian grinned at the ripples on the pond. Ah, so *that* was the book that Lan Wangji had refused to give him that day! He’d wondered why they’d been hiding it. “Yes! I *really* want to read that,” he said gleefully.

Because he definitely wanted to see what interesting things people had dreamed up when they had no limits placed on them by *everyone knows* and *we’ve always* and *the proper way* and *foolish nonsense*! There were probably some *awesome* ideas to be gleaned from it!

Granted, probably a lot of hilarious misconceptions, too, given some of the stories told about cultivators even in his time.

Lan Wangji continued playing, the resonant harmonies filling the evening without actually disturbing the quiet *feel* of the garden. The tune was unfamiliar, and Wei Wuxian wondered if that was because it had been introduced after his time, or if it was an original composition. Lan Wangji was certainly accomplished enough as a musician to have a few!

However, he could feel the weight of the man's eyes on him, heavy with an unasked question. So he simply hummed a bit in accompaniment and glanced over to meet that stare, blinking and tilting his head slightly in invitation.

Lan Wangji hesitated another moment, then asked, "What is the purpose of cultivation?"

Wei Wuxian blinked again. "Purpose? As in… what was it meant to do?"

The scholar nodded. "In our stories, cultivators are… separate from the world, and attempting to become immortal. Without death," he added as clarification. "To become more than human. But the things you spoke of today. Wards. Cleansing. Those seemed… very practical."

Wei Wuxian had to huff a laugh at that. Because… well. Cultivators certainly liked to *say* they were detached from worldly things and seeking immortality. Not that anyone seemed to ever achieve it, outside rumors and legends like Baoshan-sanren.

Now that was an interesting thought. Would Baoshan-sanren still be out there, hidden away on her mountain?

For that matter, did *he* count as immortal? He had survived fifteen hundred years frozen in ice, after all.

That was a *very* strange thought.

But really… In his experience, "seeking detachment from worldly things in search of immortality" generally only came up when the clans wanted an excuse to not get involved in annoying things like bandits and bad roads. Unless, of course, they got something out of it!

Which wasn't all that surprising. After all… maybe *seeking immortality* had meant something, when sects were gatherings of teachers and their disciples. But since Wen Mao and the shift to clan-based sects… well, most clan cultivators cultivated because that was simply what one *did*, not because they'd *chosen* to become cultivators.

Which rather explained why many of those same gentry cultivators tended to hit a wall when it came to developing their cultivation beyond a certain point. Maybe *that* was why cultivation had become a lost art.

Although if he were to be honest… the larger clan sects had already been steadily swallowing up or simply choking out the rogue cultivators and smaller sects long before Wen Ruohan had set out to do the same to them. Given what had happened to the Wen after the war, and the

sort of constant politicking and feuding that he'd seen between the victorious sects, and that filled Lan Wangji's histories…

Well. He knew from personal experience just how easily a great clan and all its special secrets could be wiped out. The Jiang had lost more than disciples in the massacre at Lotus Pier, they'd lost *knowledge*. Given how quickly a clan could fall from power… maybe he should be more surprised the sects had lasted as long as they had!

He smiled wryly, and then turned his wandering thoughts back to the original question. "There is a connection," he explained. "The idea of a cultivator is to be separate from things of the world. The doing is different. If the…" Oh. Hm. He wasn't sure what the term *dragon lines* was in the new language. For that matter, he didn't even know if they had the concept. Marking that in the back of his mind – because he wasn't really inclined to go word-hunting at the moment, entertaining as it usually was – he settled on, "If the meridians of the places are not okay, cultivating is harder. So cultivators need to fix problems."

Argh. He could *feel* how clumsy those words were. Which normally didn't bother him; beautiful language had a time and place and he absolutely intended to master that aspect simply because it was *fun* to make words dance, but talking was mostly about getting a message across and thus far he'd managed quite well, thank you.

But cultivation was tricky enough *without* worrying about mistranslation and terms that were just different enough that he might try to say something only to have something else be heard. Which was why he was recruiting Lan Wangji to help him with the cultivation manual he was putting together!

Lan Wangji didn't respond immediately, hands moving smoothly over the strings as he considered what Wei Wuxian had said. Then: "Meridians of places. You said before that qi flows stronger in some places. Are these meridians what you meant?"

Ah, he'd remembered that! As Wei Wuxian should have expected. Really, it was probably just as well that they'd been born centuries apart. The heavens could only survive so much! "Yes!" he confirmed, grinning approval at the man. "They often follow large mountains and large rivers. They affect all qi around them."

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. "And what happens if they become warped?" Wei Wuxian tilted his head, and Lan Wangji clarified, "To be warped is to become not right. To become an incorrect shape."

Hm. A useful word, that. "What happens? Not good things!" he said, and had to smile a bit at his own understatement. There really was an interesting artistry in speaking well with such limited words, it was practically a game by this point.

Still, *not good things* was probably a little *too* understated. Pursing his lips, Wei Wuxian considered his options. "Plants grow strange. Animals go other places, or change in bad ways. Or just die. People, too. And dead things are very tetchy!"

That was a *fun* turn of phrase, and so very *expressive*. Although he did also enjoy the disgruntled look that crossed Lan Wangji's face whenever he used it!

Although, since they were on the topic anyway… “The mountains near Yiling were like that,” he added. “There was a battle there, long before. It was a big battle. Many people died badly. The dying warped the meridians in that place. People called it the Burial Mounds.” He started to tilt his head in query, only to huff as his comb reached a place where his hair had tangled. “Is it still there?”

He couldn’t see the man’s face, but he could hear the thoughtful frown in that level voice as Lan Wangji answered. “I do not believe so. Yiling has many local legends, but I have not heard of such a place. The town itself is small, but prosperous enough.”

Wei Wuxian grinned at that. “So the cleansing worked! I had thought it had, but…” He shrugged ruefully.

Ah. And there was that steady stare between his shoulders again. “I learned a new thing during the war,” he explained. “So I tried.”

Granted, it had been a little more complicated than that. There’d been the problem of the Wen remnants, exiled to a desolate and dangerous area that had been all but abandoned for centuries. And… he’d developed his guidao in wartime, as a weapon. He’d wanted it to be more than that, had wanted to focus on the potential for night hunts and cleansing of corrupted lands.

Although those hadn’t been his only reasons.

Lan Wangji didn’t say anything for a moment, probably weighing his questions and deciding whether or not they were appropriate. So Wei Wuxian wasn’t exactly surprised when the man commented, “That would have been quite a long way from your home.”

Just a neutral statement – leaving Wei Wuxian free to choose whether or not he wanted to answer the implied question without forcing him to be so rude as to avoid or ignore a direct query. Really, the man was almost *ridiculously* considerate!

He chuckled. “Not so far,” he demurred. After all, Yiling had been within Yunmeng Jiang’s sphere of influence, technically. *Very* technically, because no sect had really wanted to lay a direct claim and possibly end up on the hook for being responsible for the Burial Mounds. Which had made it a convenient place to distance himself from Lotus Pier without actually *leaving*.

Not that Jiang Cheng had seen much of a difference.

He carefully maneuvered the comb, teasing the tangled strands apart again. Very, very carefully; the comb, made of lavender jade that shaded from clouded white in the teeth to violet in the lotus that formed the body, had been a gift from Jiang Yanli before her wedding. He’d treasured it and treated it with care, but the wear and tear of nearly three years of rough living had definitely taken a toll.

He had the feeling that she’d already suspected what he was considering when she’d given it to him. He’d overheard her pleading with Jiang Cheng one night shortly before she’d left for Lanling.

"Please, A'Cheng. Don't drive A'Xian away. You'll never find a stronger or more loyal second."

Wei Wuxian had to huff slightly at the memory, smiling ruefully. *I'm pretty sure that was the* problem*, Shijie.*

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lan Wangji looking at him, the odd amber of his eyes penetrating in the low light. "You went alone?"

Well, that cut right to the heart of the matter, didn't it. How awkward. Really, Lan Wangji was altogether too observant!

"Jiang Cheng was hurt when Lotus Pier was attacked," he answered, and this time he was picking his words carefully for more reasons than the awkward maneuvering of his limited vocabulary. "It made doing things difficult. During the war it was not a problem. He was the sect leader, he led, he did not fight! But after…" He made a face, remembering the patronizing sympathies, the subtle and not so subtle at *all* power grabs, the oh-so-concerned comments about *such a large responsibility*…

He shook his head. "Jiang Cheng needed to show other leaders that he was strong. That he did not need help."

More importantly, Jiang Cheng had needed to convince *himself* of that. Which was hard for him to do when he spent half his time demanding that Wei Wuxian do more and the other half seething over the fact that Wei Wuxian was doing things that Jiang Cheng was *convinced* he himself should have been doing if he could. Not a good situation.

He sometimes wondered what would have happened if Jiang Cheng hadn't lost his core after the fall of Lotus Pier. The loss had *shattered* him, and Wei Wuxian suspected that he hadn't so much healed as shoved the pieces back in place so he didn't have to think about them. But it had also meant he had something to *blame* when he never measured up to the impossible demand whispering in the back of his mind that nothing was enough, he needed to do, be, have, get *more*. If he hadn't lost his core… it might even have been worse.

Granted, the guidao hadn't helped. Jiang Cheng hadn't cared during the war; during the war, it had been *Yunmeng Jiang* proving their strength to the other sects. Wei Wuxian's strength had been Jiang Cheng's. But after…

Jiang Cheng had been captured by Wen Chao and lost his core. Wei Wuxian had been captured by Wen Chao and come out the other side with a terrifying new cultivation path that made him even stronger than before, and on some level Wei Wuxian suspected that Jiang Cheng had never forgiven him for that.

It hadn't been intentional. He'd gotten lucky, taking Wen Zhuliu out with a desperate last strike before he'd been captured while leading Wen Chao's forces away from Jiang Cheng. Then Wen Chao had thrown him in the Burial Mounds, and… well.

So he'd left for a while. Yunmeng Jiang was recovering well, established as a force to be reckoned with; they could afford for him to cultivate in seclusion for a year or two, and

maybe Jiang Cheng would sort himself out better without that engrained, constant resentment snapping at the back of his mind.

But! He saw no reason to inflict that whole complicated mess on his host, not when it was a thousand and more years past. So instead he concluded, “So! I let him do that. I am glad the cleansing worked. It took three years!”

Not exactly the subtlest of subject changes. But, after a moment’s consideration, Lan Wangji went along with it. “Will the oracle bones require a similar amount of time? You did not mention how long it might take.”

The last tangle defeated, Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully, tapping the comb against his upper lip. “Will the cleansing take that long? No,” he said, stowing the comb back in its case and plucking up his ribbon. “How long will it take?” He grinned. “That is your choice!”

Lan Wangji blinked, which in any other man would probably have been a full-body *jolt*.

Grin widening, Wei Wuxian kicked his legs up from where he’d been dangling them over the edge of the veranda, using the momentum to spin himself around to settle into a cross-legged position facing Lan Wangji. “Yes! *You*,” he confirmed, propping an elbow on one knee and resting his chin on his palm. “Do you want to learn?”

Lan Wangji hesitated. “Would that not take some time? If the oracle bones are dangerous, I do not want to delay dealing with them.”

Wei Wuxian waved his free hand. “Time? Yes, to…” Hm. Add *golden core* to the phrases he needed to work out. “…to become a finished cultivator,” he fudged. “But! You do not have to be a *finished* cultivator to do things. And Gusu Lan did cultivation with *music*.” He nodded to the guqin and winked. “Will it take time? Yes. But it will be *easier* with help. And to prepare will take time too! So the delay will be not too much.”

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have suggested it. Cleansing cursed items was usually safer than night hunts, if only because there were far fewer uncontrolled variables in the situation, but there was *always* the possibility of something going seriously wrong. There was a reason why such rituals were carried out in dedicated, warded locations; establishing such a space here would be part of the preparations.

Although. He had some *suspicions* about where the Mingshi of Cloud Recesses had ended up.

Still. Normally, he’d never consider bringing in someone who hadn’t even started proper training yet, let alone formed a core…

Except that Lan Wangji *had* training. Not in cultivation per se, but his physical regimen combined with his meditation practice had cleared and strengthened his meridians over time, building on what seemed to be a natural sensitivity – evidenced by how readily he reacted when Wei Wuxian deliberately projected his own qi slightly.

More importantly, he had discipline and *focus*. For example, despite Wei Wuxian deliberately drawing him into conversation and startling him, his hands had never once faltered on the guqin's strings. And for musical cultivation, *that* as much as the strength of one's cultivation was usually the deciding factor.

Not to mention that Wei Wuxian was fully confident of his ability to handle some dried out old bones if they decided to be troublesome, thank you.

Besides. Lan Wangji might not show it on his face, but it was quite clear that he *wanted* to learn. How could Wei Wuxian say no to that?

So he scooted across the boards to join Lan Wangji at the guqin, leaning in close so he could reach the strings himself. "Here. The first song to learn is called *Rest*…"

NOTES:

As I noted previously: with no Wen Qing, there was no core transfer. And with no Wen Ning, rescuing Jiang Cheng from Lotus Pier would have been much more dangerous. So in this setting, Wei Wuxian led the pursuit away, but was eventually captured and thrown into the Mounds as per canon, although he did manage to kill Wen Zhuliu in the fighting.

As an aside, I didn't go with Wei Wuxian losing his core here because the time displacement renders the whole "untangling the backstory" a lot less relevant (and the excitement is more *cultivation in general* rather than guidao) – and I'm of the opinion that, given what we know of the Burial Mounds, he would have ended up needing to invent guidao to escape regardless of whether he had a core because conventional cultivation simply didn't have the necessary capabilities.

One neat detail about Wei Wuxian's guidao is that he starts with big, scary abilities, because he starts out fighting in a *war*. But the things he seems to have developed after the war are all much more oriented to protection and night hunting – scaling things down to more everyday uses. He basically starts with the Big Booms and only gets to work on actual functional, practical uses later!

Geography note: I stumbled across a fandom guess that the Burial Mounds of MDZS are loosely associated with the Battle of Yiling (you can find it on Wikipedia), so I went looking for a nearby mountain range, which is where "Daba Mountains" came up. Mount Dafan is, of course, yoinked from the novel – although it would be a very, very different kind of mountain in this setting, given I'm putting a glacier on it!

(Thought, honestly? I think you could make an argument for the Battle of Changping being the origin, given that apparently they're still finding mass graves even in the modern day!)

The conversation with Lan Qiren a fun interaction to write, because this is a Lan Qiren with no Cangse Sanren grudge, canon's classism doesn't apply, and he's dealing with Wei Wuxian as an adult that he has to treat as competent. It makes for a *very* different dynamic than

canon! And Wei Wuxian is getting a very, *very* different impression of Lan Qiren this time, because rather than an antagonistic and hypocritical authority figure, he's meeting a Lan Qiren saying, "We have a responsibility to spread the word of this dangerous thing and how to contain it." It definitely makes for a better impression on Wei Wuxian's part!

To be honest, I think the Lan Xichen scene was born more from my reaction to fanon than the novel itself. For one thing… for all that fandom likes to write Lan Xichen as a Teasing Older Brother (in a way that I'll freely admit I find grating, even when the author seems to think it's cute), the only scene in the novel that I can think of that involves Lan Xichen teasing Lan Wangji is when he invites Wei Wuxian to the Lake Biling hunt. Granted, circumstances are different here, in that I decided, going into this plot, that Lan Wangji's family already knows he's gay. But…

Well. Be warned, this turned into an essay. In part because I'm still working through how to articulate it.

A quick request: **no character bashing in the comments, please**. No essays about how Lan Xichen is just the *worst*. He's not. I think, perhaps, that's why people have such extreme reactions to him. Beyond fanon painting him as Pure and Good… of all the deeply flawed characters in the story, Lan Xichen is one we're led to expect better from. With Su Minshan and Jin Guangyao and Xue Yang and Sect Leader Yao, we don't expect any better. But Lan Xichen *disappoints*.

With that said…

Part of why "teasing Lan Xichen" irks me is that, canon and fanon alike, it's extremely one-sided. Lan Wangji is not *participating*, he just endures it. He does not enjoy it. In fact, it seems to make him unhappy and uncomfortable. And getting your entertainment by making someone else unhappy… Personally? *Not cool*. Maybe it's a brotherly thing, but it's not a *good* thing.

It makes Lan Xichen come off as deeply *thoughtless*. And… I think it's that very impression of thoughtlessness which is part of why that characterization rings true to me.

For one thing, Lan Xichen has a pattern of doing things *contrary to what Lan Wangji actually wants*. Inviting Wei Wuxian on the Caiyi trip? Definitely not anything Lan Wangji wanted. Lan Xichen pretty much gaslights Lan Wangji to keep him from arguing in Wei Wuxian's defense when Jin Guangyao complains about Wei Wuxian calling out Jin Guangshan's efforts to become the next Wen Ruohan. And then there's the whole part where Lan Xichen led a force of more than thirty cultivators to drag Lan Wangji away from Wei Wuxian "for his own good." Not to mention that his whole rant in the temple is an attempt to do *exactly* what Lan Wangji was most afraid of: make Wei Wuxian feel like he *owes* Lan Wangji. Consider how Lan Wangji would have reacted if Wei Wuxian *had*, in fact, decided that he owed Lan Wangji a relationship because of that. *Ouch*.

(Though to be honest, I tend to read that rant as maybe ten percent actual grudge, and ninety percent projection and deflection.)

Even when he's supposedly being supportive, it comes off to me as very… shallow. He encourages Lan Wangji to go talk to Wei Wuxian at the Flower Banquet, but he doesn't seem to have ever explored *why* Lan Wangji wants to do so. Or done anything to help Lan Wangji's interactions with Wei Wuxian *not* constantly devolve into arguments.

Lan Xichen wants Lan Wangji to be happy. But he doesn't seem to pay any attention to the specifics of what would *actually* make Lan Wangji happy.

I'll note, as an aside, that Lan Wangji is not the only one who gets hit by this short-sightedness. Lan Xichen's lack of interest in the roots of the conflict between Nie Mingje and Jin Guangyao is part of what gets Nie Mingjue killed. And then… think about the temple in Yunping – but the ending, not the infamous rant at the beginning. The ending – when Lan Xichen asks Nie Huaisang for medicine to treat Jin Guangyao's severed arm.

Now, to be fair, Lan Xichen gave him the bottle of medicine in the first place. And he's legitimately mentally and emotionally exhausted. But still, that's a seriously bold (and kinda callous) request to begin with. Especially when you take a moment, step back, and remember that Lan Xichen has zero reason to think Nie Huaisang had anything to do with all of this. So far as Lan Xichen knows, Nie Huaisang *only in the last hour* learned that his brother was murdered. By Jin Guangyao. A guy Nie Huaisang trusted and has been relying on ever since. You know, the whole revelation that Lan Xichen himself has been struggling over this whole time.

The guy that Lan Xichen now wants medicine for. From Nie Huaisang. That guy.

Ow.

And… I think it all comes back to the line he gives us when talking about his mother's story: He doesn't know the truth, and he does not *want* to know. The real tragedy of this, to me… is that Lan Xichen doesn't fail to comprehend other people because he *can't*. He doesn't understand other people because he *does not want to*. He *wants* to be ignorant, because that lets him – to borrow a turn of phrase from a meta I read once – exist in a kind of Schrödinger's morality: as long as he doesn't *look*, everyone is good and no one is bad. Everyone he cares about, at least.

Honestly, I kind of see him as an embodiment of the three monkeys. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. And if that means actively covering his eyes and ears, so be it. He is *in denial*.

But I often see his actions framed as, "He may be in the wrong, but he's being a protective older brother!" Whereas to me, it's, "He may be a protective older brother, but he is *in the wrong*."

Does Lan Xichen love Lan Wangji? Absolutely yes, do not *dare* tell me he does not.

But Lan Xichen's love comes hand in hand with his *refusal to see*.

The thing is… there's a tendency, at least in Western culture, to see love as inherently pure and good. So long as the motivation is love, no matter what happens, it can't be *that* bad.

And… that's not true. Love can be the driving force behind absolutely toxic and poisonous behavior. *Love is no guarantee of a healthy relationship*. Even at its best, love still takes work, and effort, and overcoming your own issues, or else it's meaningless. It can even cross the line into harmful. This is actually one of things I like most about MDZS and MXTS's work as a whole: there's a running theme of relationships that are fundamentally founded in love… and go very wrong.

Which brings me to Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng is a tricky character – all the more so because fandom seems very polarized around him, and because different adaptations definitely cast him in rather different lights. I could write (rather, have written) several thousand words of meta just trying to sort out how I interpret him. But in short, my take is:

Does Jiang Cheng love Wei Wuxian? Absolutely.

And they would both have been far better off if he didn't, because Jiang Cheng does not have a healthy relationship *to love itself*.

Jiang Cheng reads to me as a classic case of what a friend says is called FLEAs – frightening lasting effects of abuse, aka the pattern where an abused child carries on the toxic patterns of behavior because they absorbed them from the abusive parent. On top of that, Madam Yu's emotional abuse – and she absolutely is abusive, in that she treats Jiang Cheng primarily as an extension of herself and uses him as a weapon against his father – left Jiang Cheng deeply insecure… and most of his insecurities seem to revolve around *loving and being loved*.

So long as there was an outside force that Jiang Cheng could feel unified with Wei Wuxian against, he was stable in their relationship – because he was confident that Wei Wuxian *needed* him. Jin Guangshan was very smart to set himself up as a concerned senior, rather than an interloper. Because once there *wasn't* an outside factor, all those insecurities and resentments came bubbling up again.

Add in the fact that in this setting, there was no golden core transfer, and… yeah. Unlike canon (where he was actually fine with Wei Wuxian as his first disciple until Jin Guangshan and the other sect leaders started poking his insecurities again), things would have been *very tense* after the war.

Chapter 12: Preparations

Chapter Summary

Plans are made. Some are more viable than others.

Chapter Notes

Quick heads-up: I have to work next Saturday. If I can manage it, the next chapter will go up on Friday; if not, it may have to wait until Sunday.

"Ha! I was right!"

Amused by his own sense of deja vu, Lan Wangji looked away from the handwritten translation he had been transcribing onto his computer and glanced over to the corner that had, over the past few weeks, turned into Wei Wuxian's study, complete with a small writing desk acquired from the university surplus stores and the upholstered chair he'd gleefully laid claim to when Lan Wangji raised the possibility.

"*It is like a bed, but for reading!*" he'd laughed. "*What would I not like about that?*"

It was fortunate that the Jingshi's study was a relatively spacious room to begin with; adding a workspace for a second person made the room cozy, but not cramped. And the proximity made it easier to work on their current project, the translation of the cultivation primer Wei Wuxian had written.

Which had been… challenging. Not so much in terms of the language itself; Wei Wuxian was a clear and concise writer, and had clearly modeled his prose on the writing in the modern books they'd given him, rather than the classical texts of his time.

The problem, Lan Wangji had to reluctantly admit, was his own scholastic training. Time and again he found himself stumbling over terminology that he had thought he'd known – but as abstract philosophical concepts, not concrete methods and *actual physical reality*.

He was still reeling somewhat from the revelation that a jīndān, a golden core, was a *real thing*. Wen Qing had *spluttered*.

To make matters even more complicated, the terminology had not remained static over the centuries. Despite cultivation having apparently been lost at some point, the ideas and language had remained. But without the actual practice to ground them, the concepts had

drifted about, accreting new nuances and ideas. Which meant that even if there *was* a modern term equivalent to the original, it might have accrued so many extraneous associations that it was actually more misleading than a less historically accurate but also less loaded word.

And to make that call, Lan Wangji had to know what Wei Wuxian actually *meant* by those words.

Which meant cultivating.

So now the morning was dedicated to cultivation training, Wei Wuxian slowly leading Lan Wangji through the basics. Wen Yuan participated as well, but only to a point; Wei Wuxian was refusing to let the boy advance to anything beyond the basic physical exercises and meditation until they had a clearer grasp of how to articulate what was needed in modern Mandarin. An ultimatum that Lan Wangji and Wen Qing had both vehemently seconded, to Wen Yuan's disappointment.

Although Lan Wangji suspected that the disappointment was mingled with relief. Even the very basic exercises were… difficult.

But the direct experience was invaluable for clarifying the language he needed… although, to his utter chagrin, he was finding that far too often, the most appropriate terminology came, not from folklore and philosophy and traditional medicine, but *xianxia genre conventions*.

It felt almost insultingly… non-intellectual. How could they expect to ask the world to take spiritual cultivation seriously when they were using a framework gleaned from popular genre fiction? But Wen Yuan had argued cogently that the genre *did* provide a coherent lexicon of commonly used terms and concepts.

Assuming, of course, that the genre conventions were at all accurate. Which was why, now that Wei Wuxian was fluent enough in modern Mandarin that exposure and immersion were more effective than formal lessons, he and Wen Yuan were gleefully having *far* too much fun making their way through the xianxia novel Wen Yuan had brought. Ostensibly so that Wei Wuxian could check his knowledge against popular assumptions, both to mine the genre for useful vocabulary and to better understand assumptions people were likely to make about *him*, but it had not slipped Lan Wangji's notice that many of those reading sessions seemed to end with the two sneaking out to the garden to see if this or that might actually *work*. Usually followed by wild laughter or even wilder victorious whoops.

He was mature enough to admit that he was very tempted to join them. But he refrained; he had challenges enough mastering the musical cultivation techniques Wei Wuxian was teaching him.

Which were *fascinating*. He had, on some level, assumed that musical cultivation was a matter of learning specific secret songs. And in a way, it was, but…

"*The Lan learned songs*," Wei Wuxian had told him, spinning his dizi in his fingers after demonstrating one such song. "*One song, one result. But the songs are not the cultivation, they are… meditation aids. Music creates energy. It makes the heart move.*" He'd smiled wryly. "*Master the energy, and any song will serve, so long as it moves as needed*."

Which was when Lan Wangji had belatedly realized that Wei Wuxian was not just carrying the dizi because he enjoyed music – although he clearly did – but also because it was a tool he used in cultivation. Which did help explain his choice of instrument; Lan Wangji could not imagine carrying a guqin into potentially dangerous situations or when regularly traveling.

Although he had chosen the guqin for himself, as the instrument he knew the best. And after consideration, he'd opted to follow the Lan tradition, at least as much as Wei Wuxian was able to recreate the original songs. In part because he felt the stability of set pieces with specific effects would give an added structure that would assist him in making up for a late start. But also… he couldn't deny that there was something personally appealing about the thought of restoring a tradition that his own family had once practiced.

It also helped that, knowing the guqin, he already had the vocabulary needed to express some of what he was learning.

Normally, he would be practicing at this time – but Nie Huaisang had somehow managed to wheedle his way into actually meeting Wei Wuxian at last. Which was… understandable. After all, if Nie Huaisang was going to be handling the public announcement of Wei Wuxian's unexpected survival, he needed to get to know the man at the heart of everything. But Lan Wangji had no interest in being Nie Huaisang's entertainment, no matter *what* leading comments the man made about *cultivation demonstrations*.

So since Wen Yuan was away at the library, they had settled in Lan Wangji's study, Lan Wangji transcribing the results of their translations thus far and Wei Wuxian working – he'd thought – on a written plan for the cleansing of the oracle bones, so that Lan Qiren could make the necessary administrative arrangements.

But when he looked over, Wei Wuxian wasn't drafting talisman designs in a spare notebook, or carefully typing on the secondhand laptop they'd acquired for him to use. (Which had the wireless network disabled for the moment; he was still familiarizing himself with computers more broadly, he did not need the distraction of the internet on top of that.) Instead, he was holding one of the campus maps that Lan Wangji had provided.

Noticing Lan Wangji's interest, Wei Wuxian turned the map around to show that it had been marked over, and extensively, the clean layout of the campus nearly covered by a mess of shapes and lines in a riot of colors. "I was curious," he explained. "Cloud Recesses has changed a lot! I wanted to see how much."

Intrigued, Lan Wangji turned fully away from the computer. Obligingly, Wei Wuxian crossed the room to lean against the edge of the desk, leaning forward and holding the map out so that both of them could look at it comfortably.

Although *comfortable* was perhaps not quite the right word for Lan Wangji's feelings about such casual, careless proximity. It did not help that Wei Wuxian had opted to dress casually for Nie Huaisang's visit, which meant he was wearing some of Lan Wangji's spare clothes: a long button-down shirt loose over a fitted tank top in deference to the relatively hot day – he'd admitted that going without at least one layer that covered his arms and upper legs left him feeling distinctly underdressed.

It was a good look. Lan Wangji also could not help noticing that the powerful muscles from a cultivator's training meant that the fitted tank top was… *very* fitted.

Wei Wuxian tapped a set of shapes traced out in black over the historic section. "This is the old Cloud Recesses," he explained. "Before the war."

Lan Wangji blinked. The area was larger than he'd expected, occupying almost the full space of the historic complex that he knew today. He'd expected it to be smaller, for some reason… although in hindsight, it made sense that a complex meant to be the headquarters of a powerful and growing clan would be at least as large as one dedicated to a monastic community.

A number of the current buildings on the map had been highlighted in yellow. Indicating them with the light touch of a finger, Lan Wangji prompted, "And these?"

"Ah. Those are a guess," Wei Wuxian admitted. "How it was rebuilt after the war."

Interesting. The older layout was reminiscent of the very early temples of the first silk roads era during the Han, still very much influenced by Indian architecture – which made sense, given what Wei Wuxian had recounted of the clan's founder. The newer layout was definitely closer in style to the temples of the Sui and Tang, probably reflecting the way designs had shifted over time.

Although, something about the layout…

Letting that elusive impression rest in the back of his mind, Lan Wangji asked, "How did you recreate this?" Because while most of the highlighted buildings corresponded to ones that were still present, not all of them did.

"I used these," Wei Wuxian replied, indicating the other set of lines, a series of arrows in neon pink and green that ran over the entire map in loops and swirls, like a wind map in a weather report or a water drainage analysis.

(Lan Wangji was not sure they wouldn't live to regret Wei Wuxian discovering fluorescent highlighters. Heavens knew what would happen if he got his hands on glitter gel pens.)

Hm. "Qi flows?"

Wei Wuxian nodded. "These…" He indicated the pink arrows. "These are the qi flows of when Cloud Recesses was built. When the Lan rebuilt, they would have used them to guide the building."

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully – and, inwardly, allowed himself a moment of warm pride in how far Wei Wuxian had progressed in such a short time. His phrasing was still too careful, too precise, stilted by the occasional odd word choice or circumlocution, but he was speaking easily and confidently now. Fluent enough to at least get by without drawing more than the occasional odd look from his accent and somewhat stilted word choices and grammar. It was an *astounding* accomplishment after less than two months of learning, with almost no resources in his own language.

“And these?” he asked, pointing to the rather violently green arrows. Some of them followed the same lines as the pink, but he couldn’t help noticing that the farther onto the map they went – and particularly, the farther onto the campus – the more scattered and disordered the arrows became.

“Ah.” Wei Wuxian rubbed the side of his nose with a crooked smile. “Those are the qi flows now. After the mountain broke.”

Which would have altered the fengshui of the area, and with it the qi flows. And while fengshui was considered important in planning construction even today… without a cultivator’s sensitivity to qi, it was likely that mistakes were made. Especially since, as with the cultivation concepts he had been wrestling with, at least some principles would have drifted over time.

Although it was still an odd feeling to hear Wei Wuxian speak of such things, when fengshui as it was understood today had only really been codified in the Song dynasty – five hundred years and more after Wei Wuxian’s time.

And now that elusive impression was becoming clearer in his mind. Because if he recalled Wei Wuxian’s original explanation of how wards worked, comparing them to irrigation canals that, once established, would siphon energy from the natural flow of qi and redirect it into a specific pattern to produce the desired effect… Well. It made sense that natural and manmade features would have a similar effect, for one. But also…

“The new layout is not unlike the ward talismans you showed us,” he observed.

Wei Wuxian’s eyebrows bounced up, and the look he gave Lan Wangji was both startled and *impressed*, followed by a slow smile that sent a warm ripple through him, even Lan Wangji chided himself against excessive pride at evoking that reaction. “Ah, you noticed!” He looked at the yellow marks, smiling crookedly. “It was an idea I told Lan Yi about once… I suppose she decided to use it after all.”

Lan Wangji hesitated, weighing whether his next question might be too prying, too *personal*. (Too much a matter of his own less than selfless motives.) But… he could not help being curious. By all accounts, Wei Wuxian had been a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang. And yet… first to learn that he had apparently gifted the prototype of his compass to the leader of another clan, and now this. It seemed… odd.

Finally, curiosity won out. “Were you and Lan Yi close?” he asked carefully, hoping that he was not being insulting or implying anything… indecorous.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Close? I suppose. Jiang Cheng hated that! Lan Yi often threatened to… hm. To make me her son?”

Oh. Apparently there had been more of an age gap than he’d assumed. “To adopt,” he answered, and was very glad that nothing in his face or voice betrayed the ugly curl of burgeoning jealousy that had wisped away in embarrassment. At least only *he* knew how ridiculous he’d been – and over someone who’d been dead for fifteen hundred years.

And now he was glad he'd asked, rather than continuing to stew in his own ridiculousness.

Wei Wuxian grinned and nudged Lan Wangji with his arm. "She would have adopted you, too," he said, lowering his voice as if imparting a delightful secret. "You are skilled in music, and you see small things that are important – and you are pretty!"

Ears hot, Lan Wangji hastily grabbed for a change of subject – even as his traitorous mind gleefully filed away the knowledge that Wei Wuxian not only considered him aesthetically pleasing, but also had no qualms against stating as much out loud. He just had no cultural context to know if that would have been a normal part of friendly camaraderie in Wei Wuxian's time, or if perhaps there was… something more that could be read into it. "If it is a ward, what is the purpose?"

"Hmmm." Wei Wuxian tilted his head slightly. "First is to smooth the flow of qi and make it stronger. Second is to be the base for other wards."

"Protection?" That seemed a logical assumption, at least.

Wei Wuxian nodded. "Usually," he said. "Sometimes other things too. But usually protection."

Lan Wangji marked the comment as one to return to later; he was curious about what other purposes wards might be used for. For the moment, however, he had a more pressing concern.

He indicated one of the highlighted places where there was no modern building; the original structure must have been removed or relocated during one of the many phases where the complex had been damaged and rebuilt over the centuries. "If it was a ward then, it is no longer intact. Is that a danger?"

"Mmm…" Wei Wuxian swayed a hand back and forth. "It is not dangerous. It is simply not useful." He smiled wryly. "To change a ward so that its effect becomes something else – that is not a thing that happens by accident." He shrugged. "But it is not *good*, either. The flow of qi is not smooth. Energy can go places it should not. That is part of your little problem with the oracle bones!"

Little problem, he called it. Lan Wangji still felt an atavistic chill every time he recalled that writhing, reaching *shadow* in the collections, even though Wei Wuxian had checked him over afterwards – and again under Wen Qing's watchful eye, to demonstrate how basic cultivation first aid worked.

Which had definitely raised the specter of crossing ethical research lines again. Wen Qing had admitted that she'd only agreed to the demonstration, and the subsequent offer of training in how to do it herself, because Wei Wuxian had been the one to suggest it in the first place.

Lan Wangji was simply relieved that the rest of the project was receiving only basic updates, and that any more detailed information would be contingent on the submission of revised research proposals. It had at least bought them breathing room.

Research proposals that would be first reviewed by Lan Qiren, then Wen Qing and Lan Wangji… and then brought to Wei Wuxian himself for final approval. That… was a level of concession that he had not expected, and he had been honestly stunned when Lan Qiren outlined the plan to Wei Wuxian when they'd met.

Then again, Wen Qing's summary of the fatality rates for curators had been… daunting. Lan Qiren believed in hard data; if the numbers showed a danger to the university's students, faculty and staff, then he would take that seriously. And to their knowledge, Wei Wuxian was the only expert available.

Which made what he'd just said very important. "How so?"

Reaching over his shoulder, Wei Wuxian tapped one of the buildings. "This is your museum now, yes?"

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. "…They rebuilt it in the same place, every time," he realized. The black outline of the layout that Wei Wuxian remembered and the yellow highlighter marking the hypothetical reconstruction overlapped so perfectly on the core of the modern museum that he'd almost overlooked it. It was not the only example of such overlap, but there were not many, either.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "It is more likely it was not lost," he corrected. "The Míngshì had very strong wards!"

Fascinating. Perhaps that explained its survival when the historic complex had been burned during the Cultural Revolution.

Although it was also somewhat ominous. For the wards to still be at all effective after centuries of neglect, they must have been *very* strong originality. And that suggested there had been a need for that level of potency. "The… Dark Room?" he translated.

"Well. Yin qi and yuan qi *are* often dark," Wei Wuxian said wryly. "The Mingshi was the place to do cleansing and to call spirits. It was also used to put things that were not okay to cleanse or destroy."

That was unsettling, even though he had already considered that possibility. As Wen Yuan had noted, many people brought things to temples for exorcism. Although…

Ah. "It was used to summon spirits. So energy could enter. But it was meant to contain what came in." He studied the green arrows again, noting the way the more chaotic patterns ran close to the museum.

Wei Wuxian nodded. "And yuan qi – resentful energy – it can be… hm. Sticky?"

Lan Wangji looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

Wei Wuxian huffed. "When one person is angry, people who are near also get angry. It spreads. But it also *pulls*. If a smaller energy is nearby, and does not have a thing to make it

not move, it will be pulled into the larger energy. Like many angry people pull more and more people in."

Those, Lan Wangji reflected, were the words of someone who had seen a mob in action. Not surprising, perhaps; between war, plague and famine, there would have been plentiful causes for unrest – and for people to seek a target on whom to vent their troubles. But he did understand the analogy. It did, however, raise a concern. "Will it interfere with cleansing the oracle bones?"

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully, tapping his lower lip, then shrugged. "We knew there was much energy in them already," he said. "It means to keep them cleansed after will take thinking. But! That the museum was once the Mingshi will help. There are wards already to use. Still! It would be good to fix."

Lan Wangji nodded. The oracle bones seemed to be the most urgent concern, but if there was a systemic problem exacerbating the situation, it would have to be addressed.

Assuming intervention would even be possible. The current layout of the historic complex was the result of years of research and analysis. To change anything would be an uphill battle, even if they could prove that the changes would in fact reflect an earlier arrangement.

Lan Wangji glanced at Wei Wuxian, and blinked, distracted from his thoughts. The cultivator was looking at the map with a strangely complicated half-smile that seemed both wistful and bemused.

"Wei Wuxian?"

Wei Wuxian blinked at him, then laughed. "Ah! No need to worry, Lan Zhan!"

Lan Wangji huffed slightly – as he'd suspected, the man refused to let that name go – but continued to wait expectantly.

Wei Wuxian huffed in turn, waving a hand. "It is only that I have gotten used to knowing that the world is different! But – here is the Mingshi. It is… strange."

"You knew Cloud Recesses well," Lan Wangji observed. Recreating the layout was one thing – Wei Wuxian had an astonishing level of spatial awareness that would lend itself to such things. But knowing the details of its defenses, even suggesting improvements to them… Like his apparent closeness with Lan Yi, it seemed… odd.

Not to mention the graffiti in the Cold Springs.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Not *so* well," he said judiciously. "But Gusu Lan had classes. The heirs of clans and some other disciples went to them."

"Cultivation classes?" That seemed… unlikely, given that the overall impression that he'd gotten of cultivation sect dynamics was one of insularity, rivalry, and reluctant cooperation for the most part.

Wei Wuxian's response to that was an inelegant snort. "That is what they were *called*," he said dryly. "What was *taught* was manners and who was family to whom… and that teachers do not have to obey rules."

Ah yes. Lan Wangji had experienced such classes – and teachers – himself.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Still, it was interesting. I met many people, and the library was interesting! Although I left after a few months." He grinned. "They were probably glad! I was some trouble. Although Lan Yi seems to have thought the trouble was… hm. Fun to watch."

"Imagine," Lan Wangji said expressionlessly, deeply amused. He had no trouble picturing the sort *of chaos* Wei Wuxian might unleash if so motivated. As for Lan Yi…

A woman, leading what he gathered to be a highly conservative clan. He could see why she might appreciate a trouble-making and objectively brilliant young man stirring things up.

Wei Wuxian laughed, full-throated and bright. "Ah, you are not nice to say such things! I was not the only trouble, you know! Even Lan disciples liked to go to Caiyi when they should not have. The wine was very famous." He blinked, tilting his head. "Ah. Does Caiyi still make Emperor's Smile?"

Lan Wangji blinked. "I do not know," he admitted. After the exceedingly disastrous aftermath of the *one glass* of wine he'd tried under his uncle's supervision after turning eighteen, he had been quite content to have nothing to do with alcohol *ever again*.

Lan Xichen would know. His position in the university meant he was frequently played host to important guests, a process that generally featured gifts of local products that were particularly rare or desirable.

But…

"We could investigate," he offered.

That caught Wei Wuxian's attention immediately. Turning, he looked at Lan Wangji with wide eyes. "*We*?" he echoed, and Lan Wangji did not think he was imagining the hopeful note in the question.

Lan Wangji nodded. Wen Qing was still concerned about exposure, of course, but the initial round of vaccinations had been completed, and she was tentatively optimistic about the results.

That was part of why Nie Huaisang had finally been cleared for an introduction – to provide his input on how safe it might be for Wei Wuxian to begin venturing beyond Cloud Recesses. Lan Wangji was personally somewhat dubious of the man's reliability, but Nie Huaisang did have the most accurate sense of what they could expect from the public.

"We will ask Nie Huaisang, when he arrives," he told Wei Wuxian.

Who blinked at him. "He is already here."

What.

The cultivator tilted his head in the direction of the door. “Someone who I do not know crossed the ward. He does not have bad… hm. Plan to do things to hurt?” He grinned. “But he is *very* nosy.”

The wards could read someone’s intent? That was *fascinating*, even if logical in hindsight, given their purpose. It would be interesting to know how that worked, if only for what it implied about how qi interacted with both the mind and the physical world, a divide that had frustrated scientists and philosophers for millennia…

However.

Rising from the chair, Lan Wangji stalked out of his office… and yes, there was Nie Huaisang standing in his garden, shamelessly craning his neck in an attempt to peer into the windows. At least the veranda kept him too far back to see anything, although Lan Wangji had no doubt that the man would have happily invited himself up in a minute or two, given he’d already walked into the *private garden*.

Adding insult to injury, Nie Huaisang didn’t even have the grace to act ashamed at being caught. “Ah, Lan Wangji!” he chirped, waving his omnipresent phone in greeting. “There you are! I knocked, but no one answered, but Dage said you would be home, so…”

“You are early,” Lan Wangji said flatly. Almost an *hour* early, at that!

“Well, yes, but…” Nie Huaisang lowered his phone to hold it to his lower lip, the tassel of artistically color-coordinated charms swaying back and forth with little chiming sounds. “I was planning to be on time!” he protested, eyes wide. “But then I got worried I might be *late*, it’s such a big campus, what if I got lost? And then those stairs were so *long* – really, hasn’t the university heard of accessibility? What if someone had a broken leg, or was just *old*, how are they supposed to get up all those stairs…”

Lan Wangji forced himself to ignore the rambling; he’d witnessed for himself how easily Nie Huaisang could pull a conversation off-topic. “Nie Mingjue was supposed to accompany you,” he said tightly.

Nie Huaisang tilted his head. “Yeeees, we did discuss that option… but I thought that the point of all this was to *not* make it obvious where Wei Wuxian is staying? I don’t know, it just seemed like I’d be far less conspicuous running around on my own than if I had the head of security showing me around, don’t you think? I mean, Dage is very noticeable!”

And that was the most infuriating part of dealing with Nie Huaisang. He fluttered, he deflected, he went off on tangents… and then he would say something like that and he would be *right*.

Then Nie Huaisang looked past Lan Wangji and blinked. Twice. “Oh. *Huh*. Hi!”

Leaning against the frame of the study door, Wei Wuxian grinned and waved – a broad, toothy grin that had Lan Wangji mentally bracing himself, because that was Wei Wuxian with

mischief in mind.

Although for the moment, he seemed content to simply observe, even as Nie Huaisang slowly swept his gaze along the length of Wei Wuxian's body, practically undressing him with his eyes…!

Then Nie Huaisang huffed and pointed his phone imperiously at the man. "Oh, absolutely not! That outfit is a *travesty*! We are getting you *real* clothes, stat!"

What. There was *nothing* wrong with the clothes. Lan Wangji wore them himself, and he was not vain but he was more than aware enough of the power of appearance to choose clothing that was suitable and not out of style. Wei Wuxian's manner of wearing them was admittedly far more casual than Lan Wangji's norm, but there was nothing *inappropriate* about it.

And Nie Huaisang didn't even have the courtesy to acknowledge his stare, looking expectantly at Wei Wuxian. "Well? Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked, as if this were not *Lan Wangji's* house.

"Hmmm." Wei Wuxian tapped his cheek thoughtfully. "I don't know. Should I?"

Nie Huaisang blinked, innocently earnest. "I mean, I am supposed to be helping you. It would be very rude to make me do that standing in the garden…"

Wei Wuxian eyed him with theatrical skepticism, then looked at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji sighed. "As he *is* here already…" he said ungraciously.

Wei Wuxian nodded, then waved a hand nonchalantly. "Well then. You seem to have permission." And then he *smirked*. "And if it is that you are doing something you should not… Wen Qing will be here soon, and that will be very funny for everyone who is not you!"

Nie Huaisang blinked. And then, unexpectedly, he *grinned*. "Oh, you and I are going to get along *wonderfully*," he purred.

Somehow, Lan Wangji *knew* he was going to regret this.

Plopping his elbows on the table, Nie Huaisang turned to look at his brother. "So," he asked, deliberately sly, "who's adopting who between those three?"

Nie Mingjue blinked at him, completely nonplussed. Nie Huaisang just kept his wide-eyed Gossip Face on, but he snickered internally. Really, his Dage was so straightforward and *clueless*, it was honestly hilarious to tweak him about it every now and then.

Because, really. He'd done his snooping! Wen Yuan had effectively been adopted by Lan Wangji in all but the paperwork years ago, and probably the only thing stopping the paperwork was Lan Wangji's unmarried status and his respect for the Wen siblings' familial claim. And the boy had clearly imprinted on Wei Wuxian like a proverbial duckling. As for Lan Wangji…

Well. Nie Huaisang would not be at all surprised if it turned out that the scholar had been doing his research on ghost weddings. Just in case he needed to stake his claim before Wei Wuxian was *officially* acknowledged as being not dead.

He certainly hadn't wasted any time marking his territory. Really, the look on his face when Nie Huaisang had criticized the clothes? *Priceless*.

Aaand Lan Qiren was scowling at him for whispering before the meeting was started. Thbbt. Still, he *was* the one who'd insisted on an update, so he supposed he might as well pay attention.

Hmph. Dage had better not expect this work ethic business to become a habit!

Still. One good thing about the man, Lan Qiren was all about getting down to business. Not Nie Huaisang's thing, but he did appreciate it in others!

"As director of the Yiling Laozu project, I have considerable leeway in reporting the results of the project to our stakeholders," he said briskly. "However, our grant obligations do include reporting every six months at minimum. All the more so because the project has undergone massive changes from the original plan we presented."

"So we have at best four months before the cat is well and truly out of the bag," Wen Qing concluded.

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, but nodded. "Given the situation, I believe that the best course of action will be to invite our primary grant providers to visit when the reporting period arrives. We can then explain the circumstances of the project in person, with a revised research plan prepared."

Heh. Nie Huaisang was impressed; everyone at the table had *very* good poker faces, but he could *feel* the skepticism.

Which made it even better when he chirped, "That seems like a good plan!"

Not that an approach like that would pass muster in any other situation. He'd looked into how projects like this normally worked, and *yeee-ikes*, the paperwork alone was enough to get a man to try to annul his college degree in self-defense!

But the Yiling Laozu project was high-profile and controversial, and that meant the people who were funding it had a taste for *theater*. That sort of bigwig would be all over the cachet of being in on a secret, and that meant they could get away with making cryptic requests that would never fly under normal circumstances.

Of course, a side effect of that would be to convince everyone else that there *was* a secret to be in on, but hey. They were going to have to blow things wide open at some point, so why not dangle some hints to build anticipation?

The sort of mad theorizing it would set loose in the forums would be *fantastic*.

Granted, the fact that Wei Wuxian hadn't actually *agreed* to anything yet did mean they were putting the cart before the horse. It would be pretty hard to justify continuing a big ticket research grant if the research subject told everyone to shove off! Although, fame by association was a tasty, tasty lure; they could probably talk people into it on that alone.

Besides. All it would take would be a hint or two that maybe they could shift the research to *revive superpower cultivation in the modern age*, and they'd probably have to beat off offers of even *more* money with one of those giant treatises on ethics in academic research.

Assuming, of course, that Lan Wangji the killjoy would agree to allowing demonstrations, because he'd mercilessly shot down every attempt Nie Huaisang had made to ask for one! He didn't want to *do* cultivation – ugh, the thought of doing all that work gave him the hives! – but really! The least they could do was let him *see* some of what Wei Wuxian do, maybe a joyride or two on the man's sword…

All right, fine, it was possible that the amount of innuendo he'd been tossing around could conceivably have something to do with Lan Wangji stonewalling him. But really, how was he supposed to resist such a golden opportunity?

Speaking of, the Face of Jade was out in force. "That satisfies our grant obligations. What of informing the public?"

Lan Qiren stroked his beard. "We will need to keep the research community informed, of course. But for announcing our results to the public…" Uncharacteristically, he hesitated. "It is my understanding," he said, "that during the Three Kingdoms period, it was customary for children to mourn the death of a parent for three years?"

For once, Lan Wangji actually blinked. "That was the recommended custom," he said slowly.

Lan Qiren huffed. "I am aware that it was simply a high class conceit based on the conspicuous performance of filial piety for the purpose of social advancement," he said dryly. "Nevertheless. As Wei Wuxian is in fact facing the loss of any family he may have had, in addition to the substantial culture shock he faces, and given the probable public response… I believe that a three year grace period for him to adjust is not unreasonable. And it seems appropriate to base our decision on a standard set by his own culture, rather than an arbitrary one on our part."

That… huh. That was a much more *sensitive* suggestion than Nie Huaisang had expected. He might owe the man a mental apology. Might.

And Dage was eyeing him as Nie Huaisang nodded agreeably. Which, really, his brother was so untrusting! After all, it was a very nice plan. Very neat. Tidy. Scheduled. Predictable.

"Now, regarding the current research proposals…" Lan Qiren started, clearly considering that distasteful but necessary conversation closed and finished. Nie Huaisang turned his attention to his media feed at that point, because quite frankly if any of the research stuff got far enough to become his problem, then that would mean that Lan Wangji and Wen Qing were slacking in their jobs and he would complain *vociferously* about it.

Although he did keep half an ear on the conversation, because *wow*, apparently he'd missed out on an extraordinary source of petty shenanigans by avoiding academia. There were some truly impressive specimens of Ego and Attitude in there.

Which was kind of hilarious. Ego and Attitude had been what he'd expected from *Wei Wuxian*. After all, superhuman cultivator, and if he'd been running around with a sword he was at least nobility-adjacent, if not nobility himself, and Nie Huaisang knew a bit about the sort of attitudes that had been prevalent among those types – he'd read *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, thank you!

Although he'd also read about the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. Now that he thought about it, a poet with social savvy and artistic skills would fit very neatly into a certain mode of premodern ideas of manliness. What a novel thought!

Although, given that Wei Wuxian was a 186-centimeter swordsman with all the muscles to match and superpowers to boot, and yet he'd opted to threaten Nie Huaisang with the far more terrifying prospect of the wrath of a tiny doctor lady? Manliness didn't seem to bother him much. He clearly didn't take himself too seriously, *and* understood and appreciated alternative means of power.

Nie Huaisang had gone there to tweak noses and get a feel for what he needed to plan for when the news about Wei Wuxian went public. He hadn't expected to actually *like* the guy!

Not to mention that while Lan Wangji was amusing to tweak, Wen Yuan's mix of simultaneous hero worship and conscientious concern all wrapped up in pure teenager *this is so awesome!!* while fighting *so* hard to appear mature and cool and unaffected was simply adorable.

Oooh, he'd gotten a response to the email he'd sent. Excellent…

Lan Qiren stood up. "Very well. If that is all…"

"A final point," Lan Wangji said, and Nie Huaisang turned his attention, if not his eyes, back to the meeting. After their conversation the day before, he thought he knew what this was about.

"I believe Wei Wuxian is ready for a short visit to Caiyi." Hah, and score! And a good thing he'd tuned back in, because he could see the reflexive huff coming. So…

"That's definitely a good idea!" he said, jumping on the words before Lan Qiren had a chance to respond. "After all, he can't acclimate to modern culture until he has a chance to experience it."

Not to mention that the man desperately needed a chance to immerse himself in modern Mandarin the way *real* people spoke it. Because while his grasp of the language was phenomenal under the circumstances, it was painfully obvious that he'd learned his speech patterns from Erudition is the Only Option Lan Wangji on one hand and a teenager on the other.

“The more time he has to adjust to the culture shock before he has to face the public, the better,” Nie Mingjue agreed, although Nie Huaisang could *feel* the raised eyebrow lurking behind his words.

Lan Qiren scowled. “I fail to see the sense in him going to *Caiyi* as a first introduction, rather than speaking to the project… but it is true that the project researchers have yet to meet their obligations for continued participation.” Huffing, he waved a hand in dismissive permission. “Very well, then. If you are all agreed, then I will leave the specifics to you four,” he declared. “In the meantime, I must speak with Chang Jianguo about his revised research plan…”

By the barely hidden grimace on Wen Qing’s face, *revised* was probably overly generous. Not to mention the omission of the title “professor” by *Lan Qiren* of all people. Now Nie Huaisang wished he’d paid a little more attention to the earlier conversation, that must have been an interesting one.

However, this worked very well for his own purposes. So he waited until the door closed solidly behind Lan Qiren, and then looked at the others.

“So!” he said brightly. “What is our *actual* plan for going public?”

His brother snorted. “I *thought* you were being way too agreeable.”

Nie Huaisang pouted, waving his phone in the air. “Dage! How can you say that? He did exactly what I asked! He gave us a very neat and tidy plan. Now when people ask – and they will! – why we didn’t say anything, we have a clear, well-planned timeline to point at…”

“And the odds of us making it to the six month mark before something blows up in our faces, let alone *three years*, were damned slim even before this mess with Su Minshan disappearing and someone meddling, possibly with help from someone inside the project,” Nie Mingjue concluded for him.

“And even if we did somehow make it the full three years, or even six months, we would still need an actual plan for managing the reaction,” Wen Qing sighed, running a hand through short-cropped hair. “And… Lan Qiren doesn’t want to think about that.”

“We already went behind my uncle’s back once,” Lan Wangji said sternly. “I do not wish to make it a habit.”

Nie Huaisang waved the hand holding his phone. “We’re not going behind his back!” he protested, deliberately affecting the most innocently dismayed tone he could. “He did his job, which was to lay out the master plan. Now we’re doing *our* job, which is filling in the gaps and making contingency plans!”

“One important aspect of which,” Nie Mingjue said grimly, “is that the two of you need to think about how you’re going to handle the explosion when it happens. Because it’s not going to affect just Wei Wuxian. We’re all going to be famous – or infamous – by association. But you two especially so, Doctor Wen, Professor Lan.”

Lan Wangji's face didn't move, of course, but Nie Huaisang was starting to get a better feel for him, and he thought the man seemed… nonplussed. Well, that made sense. He was a literature professor. People didn't get mad mobs of fans excited about old books.

Wen Qing blanched. "A'Yuan…"

Nie Mingjue exhaled heavily. "Meng Yao pulled every copy of the video from our servers and scrubbed the data to be sure. We have it, but only in offline storage. So we should be able to keep Wen Yuan's involvement relatively quiet, especially since it's not common knowledge even within the project just *how* involved he is…"

"But he's still involved, and having a random high school student as part of this… That's going to be one of those details the bloodhounds are likely to latch onto, isn't it." Wen Qing grimaced.

"And Wen Yuan has been careful, but his friends are not fools," Lan Wangji added. "It is likely they will deduce his role when they hear the news."

Ah. Oops. He hadn't considered that wrinkle, and he should have. He'd seen what teenagers were like with a mystery to solve.

By Nie Mingjue's grimace, it hadn't occurred to him, either. "We'll have to brainstorm that," he admitted. "At a minimum, we should try to reach out before things go *too* public; bringing them in on a secret is probably one of the best ways to convince them to keep that secret."

Ironic that it was the same strategy they were considering for the funding fat cats. But true!

Lan Wangji hesitated. "Is it truly wise for Wei Wuxian to go out in public? There is a risk that he will be recognized."

Nie Mingjue huffed. "I'm not worried about that. Take away the robes and hide the hair, he's unrecognizable as Yiling Laozu – all the more so because people *know* that Yiling Laozu is a body frozen in ice. It's the same thing we did to let him move around campus: there's anonymity in being impossible." He shrugged. "There's more of a risk that he might be recognized by the protestors, but we can plan around that. And Huaisang is right; the more chance the man has to get acclimated to modern culture, the better his chances of making himself inconspicuous."

Nie Huaisang had to laugh at that. "Dage. The man is tall, fit, and despite the fact that men do absolutely nothing for me, even *I* think he's devastatingly good-looking. *Inconspicuous* is not going to happen!"

Ooh, he'd definitely scored a Lan Wangji glower there. Which, yes, he'd been aiming for it, but it was also true. And all the more reason for Wei Wuxian to get out of the rarified and secluded environment of the university and meet some actual real people. Among other things, the man was in *desperate* need of some coaching on how modern flirting and dating worked, or else forget the fans and the politicians – he was likely to have half the city trying to make off with him for the purposes of making *out*!

At which point Lan Wangji would probably either go on a rampage or keel over from vinegar overdose, and while that would undoubtedly be hilarious, it would also be *stressful*. No, better to head that off at the pass.

He tapped his phone against his cheek. "Still. There are different *ways* of standing out. Inconspicuous isn't going to happen, but *fitting in*… That, I think he can manage. He does well enough already," thanks in no small part to aforementioned lack of Attitude, they really were lucky that the man was so very adaptable, "so if we can find him some proper clothes, he'll be able to pass. The Caiyi trip will be good practice; there are so *many* people there that even if he does slip, it'll get lost in the general crowd."

And give him the opportunity to arrange fitting of a different sort, because Wei Wuxian really *did* need real clothes. The black and red ensemble that Wen Yuan and Lan Wangji had arranged was excellent, very striking… but *striking* was the key word. It deliberately emphasized the fact that Wei Wuxian was *Yiling Laozu* in the living flesh. Which would be very useful when the time came for going public, but rather less so for trying to avoid public notice.

For that matter, even after they went public, Wei Wuxian was going to need less flashy clothes if he wanted to go out without being mobbed, the same as any other celebrity.

And right now the only practical everyday clothing the man had was clearly coming straight out of Lan Wangji's wardrobe. And while Nie Huaisang would grant that Lan Wangji's little boyfriend shirt fetish did make for an *acceptable* look – especially since the modifications worked to make it more Casual Student than Buttoned Up Professor – he was going to need better options when the cameras started rolling!

Lan Wangji's suspicions clearly were not eased – rude! – but he turned to look at Wen Qing.

She pursed her lips. "Avoid any form of public transit," she said bluntly. "He's responded very well to the vaccines so far, but there's no point to taking chances with that level of concentrated exposure. I'd recommend avoiding crowded conditions, period; if you're going downtown, avoid the rush hours as much as possible."

Ah, good to know; that was going to dictate certain scheduling decisions.

"Other than that, be careful about anything to eat or drink; I'd recommend avoiding street stalls entirely for the time being. Outside that?" She huffed, spreading her hands. "It's a risk, but at a certain point you have to take risks. I think he's ready for this one, *if* we're careful."

Nie Mingjue shrugged when Lan Wangji looked at him. "Pretty much what she said. Security-wise… well, locked in a vault is *safe*, technically, but it's no way to live." He drummed his fingers on the table. "The biggest issue from my perspective is that if anything does go wrong, there's not much I can do to help. Sending any of my people is just going to draw attention to you, and *avoiding* that is probably your best bet."

Nie Huaisang tapped the edge of his phone case against the tip of his nose, conveniently hiding his expression. Good; things were going in the right direction. Now it was time to

needle them a bit, because one thing he had learned about academics: they could talk a topic to death and then completely forget to *act* on it.

So. “And might I suggest that in case anything *does* go wrong, you make sure *Wei Wuxian* knows what to do? Since, after all, the final call on this is his, not ours.” He gave them a dry look. “Even if we’re still forgetting to invite him to these little planning sessions.”

Ah, that prompted some sharp looks – but also, importantly, chagrined ones. Good. Because now that Nie Huaisang had met the man? Well. Wei Wuxian was going along with them for now, but he wasn’t *biddable* in any sense of the term. If they kept talking around him, then sooner or later he was going to take the decision out of their hands.

And while the chaos would be amusing, cleaning the resulting mess up would be *work*. Pass!

That… had stung, Wen Qing admitted to herself, holding Wen Yuan’s wrist. And she was self-aware enough to admit to herself that Nie Huaisang’s words had stung because he was *right*. She’d been so preoccupied with protecting Wei Wuxian from impatient and entitled researchers who would find it all too easy to ignore the man’s agency and humanity… and she’d failed to notice that she herself had gotten into the habit of making decisions on his behalf, rather than letting Wei Wuxian make his own choices about the risks he was willing to take.

The irony left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. Yes, in the early stages that level of intervention had been necessary, given the communication barriers and how little Wei Wuxian knew about his situation. But that was not the case anymore. At this point, Wei Wuxian was fully capable of expressing his opinion, and knowledgeable enough to *have* opinions. And yet, it was so dangerously easy to slip back into the habit of leaving him out of the conversation.

Which was even less forgivable now that the tables had turned and *he* was advising *them* as a recognized expert in his own field.

A callused finger tapped her nose lightly but sharply – not even enough to sting, but so unexpected that her wandering thoughts scattered as her attention suddenly narrowed to that point of contact. “Enough,” Wei Wuxian said wryly. “You are not focusing. And if you do not focus, what is the point?”

Wen Qing huffed, but she did have to grant his point; she would have said the same to any medical student who let their thoughts wander during a diagnostic test. Even if the method was… different. Sighing, she released Wen Yuan’s arm—

And then flexed her fingers in surprise, trying to shake out the odd sensation. They weren’t *cramped*, exactly, or numb, but…

“Like pins and needles except that it doesn’t actually hurt?” Wen Yuan asked sympathetically, also shaking out his hand.

Wen Qing blinked. That… was actually a fairly accurate description of the strange feeling. As if her bones and veins and nerves were *buzzing* ever so faintly.

"Good!" Wei Wuxian said brightly. "It should not hurt! If it hurts, then you are doing something wrong and you should stop."

"Good to know," Wen Qing said dryly. Because she'd been making her way through some of the folklore sources that Lan Wangji had provided, and there were *definitely* some practices referenced that absolutely crossed the line to outright self-harm. She had *no* interest in exploring or endorsing those without serious evidence otherwise!

Wen Qing drew in a deep breath, looking at her hands, and made herself admit that it wasn't the esoteric details of what people two thousand years earlier had considered *medicinal* that shook her. While her own education had focused on Western medicine, she was familiar with the basics of traditional Chinese medicine, and she'd learned some of its history; she'd heard of the Three Pulses and reading a patient's qi. And she had been studying more, in the hopes of better understanding the *physiology* of what Wei Wuxian did…

But there was a world of difference between reading theoretical tracts and discussing techniques, and holding her young cousin's wrist and *feeling* energy flow.

A large part of her insisted that the sensation was, *had* to be, psychosomatic, her mind imposing an imagined sensation based on expectation. After all, it was one thing to accept that the man who had somehow survived fifteen hundred years frozen in ice might have abilities that were superhuman or even simply magical. It was another thing entirely to think she might attempt it for herself.

That little shake of Wen Yuan's hand confirming that he'd also felt what her logical mind still wanted, on some level, to think she'd imagined… Well. That shook her more than she'd expected.

Still. In a way, that was the point of cultivation, was it not – that *anyone* could seek to cultivate their own body, mind and spirit beyond whatever they were born with, through hard work, education and discipline.

And she was determined to master at least the basic concepts. Cultivation represented an entirely new branch of medical knowledge, not least of which were entirely new – or at least long forgotten – techniques for diagnosis and treatment. Including the diagnosis and treatment of ailments that had *also* gone overlooked and forgotten, like the resentful energy exposure they'd already discovered. What other dangers were there, overlooked or misdiagnosed because the underlying principles weren't understood?

So Wen Qing breathed through the unsettled feeling of her world shifting on its axis, and carried on with a more standard exam. Which Wen Yuan needed anyway, since he was set on trying to cultivate – which, based on what Wei Wuxian had explained so far, was physically rigorous on top of any other effects.

"Which means I want to see you on a regular basis," she told the boy briskly. "You're young and in good shape, but right now we know almost nothing about the physiology of

cultivation. I want to monitor your progress. So expect to be back here at least once a month."

At the same time, she wanted to pull on her hair and scream in frustration, because Wen Yuan was *her cousin*! She was his legal guardian! They had no business making *her* his primary physician, especially with regards to what was essentially medical research!

And yet, what else could they do? There was no way to assign a different physician to Wen Yuan without also informing them about Wei Wuxian. And that particular can of worms was already on the verge of tipping over at any moment; adding any more people to the mix would only make things more precarious, when she already *had* the skills needed.

We all *need to have statements prepared for when we go public, or we're going to be eaten alive by our own academic peers*. And they'd deserve it.

Well. Something she could worry about later.

Finished with Wen Yuan, she turned back to Wei Wuxian, who had claimed a seat on one of the other unused exam beds in the clinic, watching with interest. She'd already finished his physical – something that they were still doing weekly, although now that she'd been able to take blood tests and assess his antibody levels, and now that they were fairly certain that there would be no acute crisis from the aftereffects of his *freezing* for fifteen hundred years, there wasn't really a need for such close monitoring. But he'd expressed his own interest in knowing how modern physiological science understood the effects of cultivation on the body.

So, once Wen Yuan's exam was done, she reached into the bag she'd set on the desk and pulled out the textbook from her long-past introduction to anatomy course. "Here," she said briskly, holding it out. "If you and Lan Wangji are serious about this training guide business, you're going to want to make sure you're using the correct medical terms."

The man's eyes lit up. Well, Wen Yuan had mentioned that he loved books. Accepting it, he immediately began thumbing through the pages – only to stop almost immediately, when he found the first anatomical drawing.

Wen Qing had wondered how he would react to that. The people of his era hadn't *lacked* anatomical knowledge; she knew from her study of the history of medicine that as early as the first decade of the common era, emperors had been authorizing the dissection of executed criminals for the purposes of advancing medical knowledge, which implied that the idea had existed even before then. But medical *art* was its own genre, and the conventions had changed rather substantially. Particularly with the advent of high-quality color printing.

Wei Wuxian studied the drawing with intent interest, then looked at her with a grin. "Would you like to help with the manual?" he asked.

Wen Qing blinked. "I'm not an artist," she told him.

Wei Wuxian huffed and waved a hand. "The art, I can do," he countered. "But you have the *knowledge*. People have learned many things, it would be stupid to ignore them."

Wen Qing hesitated, uncharacteristically. She *wanted* to say yes, she realized. This was new and fascinating. And, more practically, if she wanted to learn more about the medical side of cultivation – both understanding it and utilizing it – then wouldn't it make sense to be involved in the training?

Still.

"I'm surprised there are no manuals that survived," she commented. "Didn't anyone write them?"

He snorted, openly amused. "Did anyone write them? Yes. Many. But were they useful?" He shook his head, smiling ruefully.

"Ah." Yes, that would be an issue. How often had she and other medical professionals torn their hair out over the never-ending proliferation of medical misinformation and ineffective or even actively harmful advice in self-help books and internet blogs?

And cultivation promised not only good health, but also *power* and the allure of secret knowledge given only to a select few. Of course there would have been an underbelly of charlatans feeding on the hopeful.

Still. "How did the sects train new cultivators, then? Surely they had *some* texts."

Wei Wuxian had been flipping between the illustrations of the nervous and circulatory systems, obviously comparing the two. Possibly as a reference for drawing the meridians they'd discussed; going by his reaction when he'd seen the diagrams handed down from the Tang Dynasty, knowledge of the pressure points and energy channels had become decidedly skewed over time.

At her question, however, he reeled in mock shock, hands clasped dramatically against his chest. "To write clan secrets? So that those they did not like might be able to find them and read them?"

Forsooth! might not yet be in the man's vocabulary, but he certainly conveyed the sentiment all the same.

Still chuckling, Wei Wuxian tapped the pen he'd been using to sketch notes with against his cheek. "Some people did write," he granted. "They usually wrote about… hm. Ideas, not techniques. The Lan, they wrote lots, but the library burned in the war. They saved some, but only some."

Wen Qing grimaced. She wasn't a fool; she knew perfectly well that war and the rise and fall of rulers tended to result in the destruction of *anything* that might threaten the new leaders, or that made for a convenient scapegoat at the time. It was a pattern that had repeated over and over around the world. Add in the push to standardize and centralize medical practices – something that had happened multiple times through China's long history… Well. All it would take was the choice to favor one text – and by that act mark all others as heterodox and deviant – and a great deal of knowledge would be lost all too quickly.

It might not even take anything so deliberate. The articles Lan Wangji had sent her to read were full of references to texts that no longer survived except in the form of quotes and excerpts and passing references in other texts, and that held true for everything from medical treatises to government records to plays and poetry. Add in the precarious nature of *secret* teaching intentionally restricted to a small group…

Perhaps she should be more surprised that they'd retained as much knowledge as they had.

While they'd been talking, Wen Yuan had leaned over to look at the sketch Wei Wuxian had been working on. The boy blinked. "Those are… qi meridians?"

"Hm." Wei Wuxian pursed his lips. "The simple ones, yes. But I was not a healer. That there were much… smaller ones? Sneakier ones? That, I know – but to make a map of them will be tricky."

Intrigued, Wen Qing looked over as well; they'd figured out over the weeks that if Wei Wuxian did something in public, he didn't mind an audience, and would even happily answer questions. She had not been at all surprised to learn that the man had been a teacher.

She was also aware that he was more than clever enough to talk circles around anything that he *didn't* want to tell them, without ever giving away that there was something he wasn't saying. So she could be fairly certain that she wasn't imposing on anything that he didn't want to share by looking.

Impressively, he'd already sketched a reasonable approximation of the anatomy model; he'd even lightly sketched in the central nervous system and the major nerve branches, and the major veins and arteries. Far clearer were the lines radiating outward from three nodes: the forehead, the chest, and the navel, with the last plainly acting as the primary source feeding into the other two.

Wen Yuan's finger hovered over it. "That's the third dantian, right? Where the golden core is."

"Where it *will be*, for you," Wei Wuxian corrected with an amused quirk of his eyebrow, and Wen Yuan grinned sheepishly and tucked his hand behind his back.

Wen Qing pursed her lips. "If that's where it is, then why didn't it show up in the X-rays?" she huffed.

She'd finally gotten the chance to take those just a few days ago; the process had been slow because, as with the vaccines, she'd wanted to be sure Wei Wuxian fully understood what she was asking for – and, Wei Wuxian being Wei Wuxian, how the process worked and what it could be used for – and frankly speaking, the vaccines had been far more important.

At least he'd responded to the idea of X-rays with the same curiosity and interest that he had the vaccines and every other oddity of the modern world. Wen Yuan's book on great inventions had included a sidebar on the social reaction to seeing the skeleton of a living human before the use of X-rays in medicine had normalized the concept. *I have seen my death*, indeed.

Granted, given Wen Yuan's comments about cultivation and ghosts, it was possible that to cultivators the face of death was less a thing of atavistic horror and more a necessary business acquaintance… but she had her doubts. Wei Wuxian was *incredibly* intelligent and adaptable, and she had no intentions of taking that for granted.

The man hummed thoughtfully, tilting his head. "An X-ray is to show what is hard within the body, yes? Bone and teeth and metal?"

Wen Qing nodded; she'd mentioned that last to him because she'd still been worried about that arrow wound – even more so when he'd admitted to having no real memory of getting it beyond the last few flashes of vague sensations before he'd woken out of the thawing ice on a lab table.

Part of her had to laugh at that; Yiling Laozu had been called the Chinese Ötzi so frequently in the international media, and it turned out that the parallel extended all the way to the final events that had led to their preservation in the ice… with the significant difference that Wei Wuxian hadn't been dead, not that the world knew that yet.

The X-rays had, at least, laid one nagging worry to rest; there'd been no sign of metal fragments in Wei Wuxian's body, either from that arrow or any other old wounds.

"Then maybe that is the answer," Wei Wuxian suggested. "The core is of qi, it is not hard like bone. Does an X-ray show fire?"

That… was an interesting question, actually. She had no idea if anyone had ever tried it. Although that did raise the question of trying to detect a core using MRI or other more energy-oriented methods.

Although if it turned out that a core was somehow radioactive, she would be having *words* with the universe.

Wen Yuan was looking at the diagram Wei Wuxian had sketched again. "So how long does it take to form a core, anyway?" he asked, simply *radiating* that he was asking purely out of innocent academic interest, no ulterior motives here, no sir!

Wen Qing huffed her amusement, raising a droll eyebrow at him, because that hadn't even been *subtle*.

Credit where it was due, he met her expression and just stepped up the innocent sparkle a bit. *Someone* had been taking inspiration from Wen Ning.

Wei Wuxian laughed and poked Wen Yuan in the forehead. "*That* depends on who! *You* are still building your foundation. That is first!"

Wen Yuan held his innocent front a moment longer, then smiled sheepishly. "I know… I'm just excited about getting to the cool stuff!"

That got him a mock-scolding tongue click as Wei Wuxian wagged a finger at him. "You are opening your meridians and preparing your dantian. Water cannot flow if there is nowhere for

it to go!"

"When *does* the change happen? From physical training and meditation to… powers?" Wen Qing asked. And then flushed, well aware that she sounded like an impatient xianxia fan herself. But it was something she'd wondered about for a while.

Wei Wuxian blinked, looking genuinely nonplussed for a moment. "There… is no change?" he said after a moment, tone hesitant the way it became when he wasn't sure he'd correctly understood a question. "Qi is not a thing that is *other*. You cultivate – body, breath, spirit. Your cultivation *grows*, it does not change. To form a golden core – it is an important step. But it is one step of many, before and after."

Interesting. That seemed to describe a far more *organic* process than depicted in some of the folklore…

But then again, quite a bit of modern xianxia, with its stages of core development and secret techniques, seemed very much to have been built on the same mentality that enjoyed "power levels" and a straightforward idea of "strength" as a numerical matter that could be lined up one against the other without any concern for circumstances or specific skill sets. It wasn't hard to imagine that such mentalities would have existed in the distant past as well, with the same urge to break the world up into neat categories and stages.

Wen Yuan drooped slightly, not exactly pouting but with a definitely woebegone air. "So… more handstands," he said with a rueful smile.

Wei Wuxian grinned at him. "Yes. The Lan style suits you, but strength and balance are needed first."

Wen Yuan sighed, a little more dramatically than Wen Qing thought the situation warranted – he was a xianxia fan, he should have known what he was getting himself into when he'd asked for training – and then tilted his head curiously. "Wait, *Lan* style? I thought you were Jiang…?"

"Mmm…" Wei Wuxian shrugged. "The Lan path – that is to be… unmoving, not falling… flat? …when much is changing. It is… like a mountain." Suddenly he snapped his fingers, face brightening. "Ah! It is being *still*. It suits you." He wobbled his hand. "The Jiang way is like a river. It is moving. To find what is hard and to try anyway. It might suit too… but for you, the Lan way is the better start."

"But you *can* learn other styles? It doesn't mess up your cultivation?" Wen Yuan asked, clearly fascinated.

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Many clans would say, would! But no. The style is a *tool*. But the *foundation*, that is *discipline*."

Wen Qing hummed thoughtfully, considering that. If *discipline* was the core of cultivation… well. That would explain why Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan both passed muster as potential candidates for training. Lan Wangji, at thirty-five, was well beyond the supposed age limit for forming a golden core – assuming such a limit *actually* existed, rather than being the product

of the human tendency to assume that special abilities were exclusive to a select minority in some way. But he had achieved a *ridiculous* level of academic accomplishment for his relatively young age, with two doctorates and truly impressive number of articles published despite also shouldering a respectable teaching load. And Wen Yuan was maintaining a successful life as a student while effectively pursuing university-level private studies. And both of them meditated regularly and maintained active fitness regimens.

Although it did also explain why Wei Wuxian was so insistent on Wen Yuan's physical training. Besides keeping the boy busy while they thoroughly checked and rechecked the translation of the manual Wei Wuxian was making… well. Wen Yuan was fit, but not an athlete. If Wei Wuxian was serious about there being no clear dividing line between physical training and superhuman strength, that implied that a very high level of baseline fitness was a must.

Which meant that if she was going to be serious about exploring the medical side of cultivation… She had confidence in her mental discipline, but she should probably step up her workout routine.

Wei Wuxian feigned a poke at Wen Yuan's stomach, grinning when the boy squeaked and pulled away reflexively. "The starting is the most important," the cultivator told him. "The foundation needs to be right. You do not want qi to flow the wrong way!"

Attention sharpening, Wen Qing leaned forward. "And what happens if it does?" she asked intently.

Wei Wuxian blinked, apparently taken aback, but then nodded slightly. "Ah. For Wen Yuan… a foundation that is made wrong can affect roots and meridians. It would limit the growing of the core and his cultivation."

Not so different from other forms of martial arts, or any other physical skills; a bad start would create habits and patterns that would have repercussions for the student's ability to progress at more advanced levels.

She gave the man a stern look. "And you?" she pressed. "What happens if something goes wrong with *your* qi?"

"Ah." He smiled crookedly. "For a person with a golden core… for qi to lose balance is bad. If… hmmm. Anger that is not controlled, or sadness, or to use qi in a wrong way – those are the causes that happen most. If it is too strong, or for a long time. It can cause… *zǒuhuǒ rùmó*." He picked up the notebook and flipped to the back, which he used as a scratchpad when he was unable to find an adequate circumlocution for the concept he wanted, and quickly scrawled four characters.

Wen Yuan blanched. "So… qi deviations are a real thing?"

Wei Wuxian nodded. "They can be."

Wen Qing narrowed her eyes and picked up her tablet, opening her note-taking app. "What are the symptoms? And how is it treated?"

Fortunately, *symptoms* and *treatment* were both terms the man had learned during the crash course he'd gotten about vaccines. "Symptoms…" He pursed his lips, clearly considering his available vocabulary again. "One sees enemies where there are no enemies. One thinks that people they trust cannot be trusted."

"Paranoia," Wen Qing translated.

Wei Wuxian glanced at the characters as Wen Yuan wrote the word out, then pursed his lips and nodded, clearly noting the term for future reference. "That is one face of unbalanced qi. Another is… hm. Focus without control. Thinking that cannot move from one thought." He tilted his head. "Also, to become easily angry, at small things, or things that before did not cause anger, and to not be able to control the anger."

Then he huffed, smiling ruefully. "That is *unbalanced* qi. Zuohou rumo… one sees things that are not there. Everything is an enemy one must fight and destroy."

So. A slow degeneration of self-control, with an acute crisis similar to a psychotic breakdown – Wen Qing made a mental note to review the literature on medical conditions that affected mental states, and to look for a psychiatrist to consult once the project opened up again.

One thing was bothering her, though. "How do you tell the difference between that and mercury poisoning? The effects of cinnabar," she asked.

Assuming he even knew about that – although from what she'd read, the deleterious effects of refined cinnabar had been well-known by physicians even as early as the Qin dynasty. It was just that some claimed that the death of the body was part of the refinement of the spirit… and it was also possibly a convenient tool for eliminating people they disliked.

Wei Wuxian exhaled explosively. "Ah. You know about that. *Good*."

At Wen Qing's startled blink, he smiled wryly. "Cinnabar – it is powerful and useful if used correctly and it should not be used by anyone who does not have a golden core!"

She raised her eyebrows. "A golden core can counter the effects of cinnabar?"

He shrugged, wobbling his hand. "Some. It is better to be very careful! And," he added with a crooked smile, "it is expensive!"

Shaking his head, he waved a hand. "But you asked about differences. The first difference is that the sickness of cinnabar… mercury poisoning, it is called now?" At her nod, he continued, "Mercury poisoning causes a *changing* in the mind. A person becomes… not as who they are. And the changing does not stop. The ground of the spirit becomes water." Raising his other hand, he added, "Qi deviation… it is in the word, zuohou. The ground of the spirit *burns*. The person does not become not that person, but too much, too strong, without control." He smiled wryly again. "And the wanting to destroy everything. That is sometimes there, too."

That is there, too – as if the thought of someone with Wei Wuxian's strength and abilities in a blind berserker rage wasn't terrifying to even *contemplate*. "What about treatment?" Wen

Qing pressed. Because if that was the outcome of an acute case, then far better to handle the underlying problems before reaching that point!

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “The problem is qi that is not balanced. To treat it is to make the qi balanced again. But *why* the qi is not balanced can be many things!” He sighed. “Often, it is a… heart-demon? That is a thought or feeling that pulls qi and mind in ways that are not good. And for that… well. Sometimes a person cannot face that, or *will* not.”

Psychological problems creating a feedback loop with cultivation? That… made a great deal of sense, actually. Mental health and physical health were deeply connected, and from the way Wei Wuxian talked about cultivation as a holistic process involving body and mind together… well.

She wondered what he would make of modern psychology. The simple fact that he had a concept for psychological disorders that accounted for the intrusive thoughts and unbalanced emotions while recognizing their internal nature was promising. Then again, it might cut too close to home; there was something in his bearing that reminded her of doctors explaining diseases that had affected their own family. It was possible he’d *known* people who’d suffered from such “heart demons.”

He’d lived through war, upheaval, and had whip scars on his back. It wasn’t just possible, it was practically inevitable.

“And a qi deviation?” she asked; conversations about the possible role of psychological counseling in cultivation training could wait for the moment, after all. At the moment, her main concern was grasping the scope of potential problems.

Wei Wuxian huffed. “Well. If another cultivator can help, *sometimes* one can help the qi to balance. But it is not easy. It is like helping a stopped heart to start again. It *might* work. It might not.” His lip quirked humorlessly. “Except that to start a stopped heart does not usually mean a danger that the helping person’s heart will stop too. And, of course, if the qi deviation is bad, then it is dangerous to get so close!”

Well. That was a lot to take in. Although it was fascinating that apparently he was familiar with some version of CPR. Still, she was more concerned about the fact that apparently a qi deviation could be *contagious*.

Wen Yuan had been quiet through their exchange, watching them both with wide eyes. Now he gulped audibly. “And… qi deviations can happen when someone’s… really upset?” he asked, obviously trying not to be too blatant with his concerned look at Wei Wuxian and not really succeeding. “That seems… really dangerous.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled, patting the boy’s head with a wry smile. “Dangerous? It can be!” he admitted. “But so is a dam on a river if it breaks. That does not stop us from *building* dams. Dams are useful. And so is cultivating.”

Wen Qing blinked and hummed thoughtfully. It was an interesting analogy, and one that made sense – particularly in light of China’s history of devastating floods from the Yellow

River, and the potential consequences if something like the Three Gorges Dam were ever to fail. And on a more human scale…

Well. How many would-be athletes had had their careers cut short by training accidents or even just the mental stress of trying to do too much, too fast? How much higher would the stakes be for the promise of superhuman abilities and even potential immortality?

Exhaling slowly, she deliberately clenched her shoulders, then released them, forcing the accumulated tension out. She understood Wen Yuan's worries. She'd been concerned enough about the possible effects of emotional shock and grief on Wei Wuxian's immune system. And who was to say that the reality of his effective exile into the distant future might not still come crashing down at the worst possible moment?

On the other hand, he'd weathered a war and the deaths of many people he knew already, and he'd come through the first and most shocking part of his unexpected trip to the future with his mind intact and hopefully no lingering cultivation-related consequences. In hindsight, it might have been a good thing that he'd figured out the time displacement himself, as a gradual realization, rather than having it dropped on him out of nowhere.

If he'd survived all *that*… Well. Between that and the man's overall temperament and resilience, she was willing to tentatively assume that short of truly exceptional circumstances, qi deviation would not be a major worry. However.

She gave the man a stern look. "If it takes a cultivator to pull someone out of a qi deviation, then there is *no one* who can help if it happens to you. I expect you to be *careful*. If you get overwhelmed, tap out and give yourself time to recover." She raised her eyebrows. "You've agreed to teach Wen Yuan. I hold you to that. Which means you need to be there for him."

On Wei Wuxian's other side, Wen Yuan made a face, the classic grumpy moue of offended teen pride… but he didn't actually complain, which meant he understood what she was getting at: in a crisis, sometimes the knowledge of being responsible for more than yourself could make the difference between survival or succumbing.

For that matter, from the wry smile and surprisingly serious bow that he sketched in her direction, she suspected Wei Wuxian understood that just as well.

Wen Qing sighed. "Well. You're both in good health, so we should be done here. I do want to check in again after the trip to Caiyi, Wei Wuxian. Potential for exposure aside, you're going to be dealing with a *lot* more people than you've seen in quite a while, as I understand it. I do understand the reasons, and it's probably a good idea, but it's going to be stressful for you."

Wei Wuxian chuckled ruefully. "Yes," he admitted. "Caiyi is… bigger than it was."

That was probably an understatement. She suspected that Wei Wuxian didn't even have a frame of reference sufficient to really understand the population density of a modern city. And that didn't even get into things like skyscrapers, shopping centers, *traffic*…

Wen Yuan cleared his throat carefully. "So… I had a thought about that?" When they looked at him, he fidgeted for a moment, then said, "We already decided I'm not going. So… what if

I gave you my phone?"

Wei Wuxian blinked. "Phone?" he echoed, and then brightened when Wen Yuan held his up. "Ah! That, I have seen before. It is for…" He hesitated. "Emailing? Speaking?"

Wen Yuan grinned sheepishly. "I mean… yes? Although these days they're more like really small computers, you wouldn't *believe* what some people do with them… But this way, if something goes wrong and you get lost or separated from everyone, you'll have a way to contact us." He looked at Wen Qing. "If you think that's okay? Nie Huaisang thought it was a good idea…"

He would. Which didn't mean he was wrong. "I think it's a worthwhile precaution," she said.

In fact, given how mobile Wei Wuxian was, and their concerns about security, it was probably time to think about getting him his own phone anyway. She just wasn't sure how to navigate the issues of a potentially trackable digital footprint.

There was also the minor detail that once Wei Wuxian had a phone, it would be only a matter of time before they finally had to introduce him to the wild jungle that was the internet and social media. And she didn't think *anyone* was ready for that.

At least he didn't know that the name *Yiling Laozu* was attached to him. Because if he did… well. The man probably didn't really want to know what sort of very graphic literature had gotten attached to the imagined identity of what people had assumed was a frozen corpse.

"Make sure to show him how to send his location," she told Wen Yuan. "That's probably going to be the most important part."

Wei Wuxian blinked. "Send… a location?"

Wen Yuan nodded eagerly. "So that the other person can see a map showing where to find you! She's right, that would be really useful…"

Slowly, Wei Wuxian began to grin. "So. What *else* can a 'phone' do?"

OMAKE:

"To change a ward so that its effect becomes something else – that is not a thing that happens by accident."
Wei Wuxian, thinking: *I of all people should know!*

Nie Mingjue shows up at the door to pick up Nie Huaisang. "How did it go?"
LWJ: "I have witnessed the birth of a monster." Beat. "Wen Yuan is making popcorn."

LEXICON:

Zǒuhuǒ rùmó (走火入魔), literally "catch fire and demons enter," but usually translated in English as "qi deviation."

NOTES:

Amusingly, I didn't actually *plan* to make Wei Wuxian's circumstances parallel Ötzi's so closely – the arrow wound was meant to be a callback to the arrow at the Pledge Conference in Nightless City (and the Qiongqi Pass ambush – as well as ye olde "what tactic is most likely to actually *work* on an experienced and powerful cultivator?"). But once the parallel clicked, I had to call myself out on it!

Musical cultivation: based on what we see at Mount Dafan, *what* song is played doesn't matter so much as the emotional energy evoked by the music, at least for Wei Wuxian's guidao. On Mount Dafan, he realizes that in his urgency to save Jin Ling and the others, he'd made the music too intense, so he plays Wangxian because he finds it calming. The same thing happens at Nightless City – he projected too much of his fury in the music and couldn't dial it back in time when he saw Jiang Yanli.

(It probably didn't help that it *was* Nightless City and therefore the dead he summoned were likely *Wen disciples and civilians killed in the fall of the city*, which would mean they would have had grudges and been resistant to stopping! Which, as I note in my *Bitter Plants, Sweet Fruit* fic, was probably something Jin Guangshan was counting on…)

So here, I'm playing with the idea that Lan musical cultivation is designed around specific pieces with set effects – stable and reliable but relatively inflexible – while Wei Wuxian's is based on empathic connection, flexible and powerful but requiring greater personal control and engagement.

Regarding the Gusu Lan lectures: first, as I mentioned previously, they're actually the *Lan Qiren* lectures. The novel is very clear that the kids aren't being sent to the Lan sect, they're being sent to Lan Qiren specifically… because he has a reputation for hammering rambunctious boys into Gentlemen: "*The Gusu Lan Clan had a great and famous old veteran named Lan Qiren, who the cultivation world widely considered to possess three special characteristics: traditionalism, inflexibility, and the ability to produce brilliant students through his strict instruction. Though the first two points led most to keep him at a respectful distance, and some to secretly dislike him, the last caused many to use every method at their wits' disposal to send their children to him to receive his teachings. The Lan Clan had produced many outstanding disciples under his hand, and even children who had started as useless pieces of dog excrement were able to at least* look *respectable once they had studied in his classroom for one or two years. Exhibiting an incomparable improvement in bearing and etiquette, the children often moved their parents to tears when they were finally reunited.*" (Fanyiyi translation)

Note that last bit. “Improvement in *bearing and etiquette*.” Now throw in the detail that outside one or two gotcha questions when he’s trying to wrong-foot WWX the first day, everything we hear about them learning in his class is *history and manners and genealogy*. Wei Wuxian even lampshades it during the Mount Dafan arc!

So. My read on that? Those lectures aren’t about learning cultivation in terms of a spiritual magic system. They’re an *etiquette and comportment boot camp*. (An ineffective one, at that, given the results we see.)

It’s actually a very elegant bit of foreshadowing: this is a setting where appearance and making the right noises – and more often just being the Right Sort of Person – means far more than actual merits. Along with the hint that reputation is not reality, given that we’re *told* Lan Qiren is supposed to be this great teacher and then the rest of the chapter thoroughly *shows* that he’s anything but.

(Fun aside: I’m pretty sure the gotcha question about defining the differences between mo and gui and yao and such is also a bit of foreshadowing, pointing out that the difference between *mo*dao and *gui*dao is actually a relevant one!)

Also, no, Wei Wuxian was not kicked out of the lectures. His punishment for fighting was kneeling for hours. He *chooses* to leave after that, at Jiang Cheng’s suggestion.

Speaking of, Jiang Yanli’s engagement? Was not broken because Wei Wuxian punched Jin Zixuan – if that were the case, then Jin Guangshan would have been the one to demand it broken. Jiang Fengmian is the one who breaks it, *because of Jin Zixuan’s behavior*. In essence, Jiang Fengmian is *backing up* Wei Wuxian’s decision to punch Jin Zixuan. There’s a very good meta on Tumblr regarding the social dynamics involved in that fight: https://moonbelowsea.tumblr.com/post/694512776241102848/mdzs-analyzing-the-cloud-recesses-lectures-brawl

Long story short? Wei Wuxian didn’t break the engagement by punching Jin Zixuan. *Jin Zixuan* is the one whose behavior is responsible for the breaking of the engagement. Wei Wuxian simply made it impossible for people to continue conveniently overlooking Jin Zixuan’s misbehavior. Hm. Does this sound familiar…?

Also, regarding Wei Wuxian loving books? Canon, he recognizes the Thousand Holes Curse from his time browsing the Lan library. Likewise, any reference to other texts in any research he did in the Burial Mounds would have to be *from memory* – he had no access to reference sources or even any notes he might have made before that!

And I have to admit… even with qiankun bags, how much of the Lan library could they really have saved? I suspect that a lot of the archives in the main story time period were actually the result of an active collection effort *after* the war…

As for the whole “cultivation is organic in development, there’s no clear dividing line between human and superhuman” thing… Wei Wuxian, *sans core*, manages to move faster than Lan Wangji, is able to draw a cultivator’s bow, survives being *eviscerated*, and is able to throw an arrow, *by hand*, *accurately*, with the same force as aforementioned cultivator’s bow. And nowhere is it ever indicated that guidao involves physical enhancement, given that every

time we see him use it, he does so externally. I'd say that in MDZS, at least, there's no hard line marking what you can and can't do with or without a core, at least in terms of physical strength and endurance!

(Well. To be honest, I also suspect that a lot of it is that MXTX tends to be a bit handwavy on the specifics of how the magic (sic) system actually works. Wei Wuxian being able to do those things appealed to the Rule of Cool, so he could do them!)

…although I couldn't quite resist taking a potshot at "power levels" and ye olde "but who is Stronger" mentality…

My headcanon for the Lan sword style is that it emphasizes stability and a strong root, while the Jiang style emphasizes agility and awareness of surroundings – very necessary for people who have to fight on boats and therefore can't rely on stable ground to root themselves with! (And interestingly, that would mean both forms emphasize strength and balance, but in very different ways!)

One of the reasons that I don't buy the idea that Wei Wuxian's guidao is inherently harmful is the fact that we're *shown* a case of someone corrupted by resentful energy: Nie Mingjue. And nothing about Wei Wuxian's behavior matches what we see there. In fact, despite the popular trope in fandom of treating Wei Wuxian during the Burial Mounds settlement period as a hot mess, when I read that part he actually comes off as *happier and more emotionally settled* than he has been since the fall of Lotus Pier – and arguably more than we've *ever* seen him, save for after his revival. It's particularly notable that the Wens become *less* afraid of him over time – the exact opposite of the pattern we see with Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang. The only place where Wei Wuxian's mental stability is ever in doubt is the extremely short period between the ambush at Qiongqi Pass to the pledge conference at Nightless City, and given the endless cascade of everything going horribly wrong and the back to back to back tragedies and betrayals and traumas he gets hit with, all of his reactions are perfectly understandable during that mess, no supernatural "corruption" needed.

Also? It really is remarkable how close "deterioration from resentful energy" (as evidenced by Nie Mingjue, etc.) really does resemble the effects of mercury poisoning… Given the extensive use of cinnabar in Chinese history, especially as a prestigious material, I suspect that's not an accident!

Chapter 13: On Caiyi and Clothes

Chapter Summary

Nie Huaisang has *plans* for Wei Wuxian's first visit to Caiyi.

Chapter Notes

Quick disclaimer, I've never been to a Chinese city, so a lot of this chapter is based largely on photos and my memories of navigating Tokyo, with is the only seriously urban place I've ever lived in. (Especially the guy with the subtly flashy suit – he's based on someone I observed on a train.)

Lan Wangji drew in a slow, careful breath, and forced his hands to ease their grip on the steering wheel until sensation returned to his fingertips. Which did not help with the tightness in his jaw from clenched teeth, but… it was a start, at least.

He did understand why Nie Mingjue had been adamant about taking a car. The bus, of course, had never been a viable option; there was simply too much risk of exposure – not only to disease, but to recognition. There were more than a few protesters who rode the buses regularly.

And if Lan Wangji had doubted Nie Mingjue's grim suspicion that someone was egging the protesters on… the fact that they were *still* going on after more than two months was not reassuring; at a minimum, he would have expected local officials to intervene in the name of public order by now. And if there *was* someone watching the project – possibly the same someone who had arranged for the break-in the night they'd moved Wei Wuxian out…

Well. Public transit to and from the university… did not feel as safe as it once had.

And while taxis or DiDi were technically an option, on reflection he did have to agree that Wei Wuxian would be better served with the chance to experience an automobile in private, to let him react and ask what would surely be a myriad of questions freely, without simultaneously dealing with a driver who would be his first close encounter with someone who was *not* informed as to Wei Wuxian's identity.

Lan Wangji even understood – reluctantly – that Meng Yao and Nie Zonghui were both occupied with the search for Su Minshan, looking for clues about the meddler, and a recent uptick in protestor activity, and thus were unavailable to drive. And quite frankly, he did *not* trust Nie Huaisang behind the wheel. Even knowing perfectly well that the man had likely

deliberately cultivated that impression with the express intent of getting out of such responsibilities.

Except that now he was realizing that his driving left Nie Huaisang in the back seat with Wei Wuxian, and he trusted *that* arrangement even less.

Not to mention that it meant *Nie Huaisang* got to be the one answering Wei Wuxian's enthusiastic questions about cars and modern cities, not Lan Wangji.

At this point, he was more or less resigned to his own ridiculousness.

"So how does one move something so heavy?" Wei Wuxian was asking. "Electricity? It seems much larger than most electric things, and a cord would be very awkward!"

"They *do* make electric cars these days," Nie Huaisang demurred. "But it's still relatively new technology. Most cars use internal combustion engines. Basically, it works a bit like, oh, a watermill. But rather than being run by water, it's run by air, because hot air takes up more space than cold air. So – light a spark, *fwoomp!*, it pushes the engine. The air cools off, it shrinks, light the spark again!"

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully. "There is very little smoke," he observed.

"These days, yeah. We've gotten good at limiting it. But cities can still get *so* smoggy in the summer, it's *awful*! So you should probably brace yourself."

Wei Wuxian huffed. "I have seen bad city smoke before. But thank you for the warning." His tone turned sly. "So. The engine. How much did you study to explain?"

Nie Huaisang laughed, waving his phone. "Wei-xiong, what do you take me for?" he protested, as Lan Wangji's hands tightened on the wheel again at the unnecessarily familiar tone. "I don't *study*. I have a phone and I know how to use it!" He paused. "Although I did open a few tabs in advance."

In the back of his mind, Lan Wangji huffed – although, he reminded himself, he'd done the same thing quite often, trying to find answers to the huge range of questions Wei Wuxian asked about everyday things that Lan Wangji had not thought about since he was a small child. If even then.

At least when he'd done it, he'd been open about needing to look up his answers, rather than reading them off a screen and pretending it was his own knowledge!

Still, he did have to admit to a certain amount of fond amusement at how easily Wei Wuxian had picked up on what Nie Huaisang was doing, when he'd only held a phone for the first time the previous evening. Lan Wangji had waived his own rule regarding mealtime conversation, and he, Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian had spent the evening with the book on great inventions, doing a speed-run history of the invention of phones, cellular signals, and the internet.

In hindsight, Lan Wangji could grant that he perhaps had been a little… overbearing in his emphasis on the dangers of misinformation online. Given what Wei Wuxian had said about false cultivation guides and the dangers of cultivating incorrectly, the man was perfectly familiar with frauds and the false confidence that came with knowing just a little bit about something but not enough to realize what one *didn't* know.

As for the other potential risks of the internet… Well. Wei Wuxian had lived in a time when the wrong word at the wrong moment could have fatal consequences, either by offending the wrong person or allowing information to slip to an enemy during war. He likely grasped the dangers of saying too much online far better than the people who'd grown up using the internet.

Small wonder he'd seemed amused by Lan Wangji's repeated warnings.

Not to mention that his assessment of social media, after they had tried to explain the phenomenon, had been a rather dubious, "So it is like gossip at a cultivation conference? Except that anyone may see it? And it never ends?" No doubt his assessment would change later, when his social circle expanded somewhat, but…

Fortunately, those were concerns that they could address in more detail later; for today, the phone was mostly a precaution against problems during the trip into Caiyi. Although Lan Wangji was under no illusions: now that Wei Wuxian had been introduced to phones and the internet, he *would* want to explore more.

Especially now that the man had discovered *apps*.

They'd started out intending to simply practice making calls, but it had quickly become evident that without recourse to facial expressions and gestures and a thousand other subtle cues that Lan Wangji hadn't even realized *existed*, Wei Wuxian's ability to understand what was being said and to communicate in turn were distinctly curtailed. Not to mention that Wei Wuxian was clearly uncomfortable with the phone; he kept reflexively turning to look for the person he was talking to, and he disliked the way it interfered with his awareness of his surroundings.

So, at Wen Yuan's suggestion, they'd settled on texting as their preferred mode of communication. Wei Wuxian was already familiar with the concept of typing, and it removed the immediate-response pressure of a call – important, given that they would already be stressed if a situation required them to be relying on the phone in the first place.

Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian had also walked through the "send my location" function, very carefully. Which Wei Wuxian had found *fascinating*. Apparently it was common practice in his own time to carry signal flares in case of emergencies – given the risk of also drawing *unfriendly* attention, Lan Wangji could understand the appeal of a more direct and less obvious way of notifying allies of your location.

He was still wrapping his mind around the implications of the fact that gunpowder had apparently *predated* the Tang, at least within the cultivator sects. Lan Wangji had to wonder – how many other Tang inventions were the result of technology that had once been sect secrets becoming more widely known?

It had also reminded Wen Yuan that if he didn't want Wei Wuxian to get his hands on far too much teasing material, he would need to disable his social media feeds and adjust the notification settings for the duration of the trip, after Lan Jingyi had texted him *something* in the middle of the lesson that had left Wei Wuxian laughing breathlessly and Wen Yuan *very* red-faced.

Lan Wangji had opted not to ask. He was not Wen Yuan's legal guardian, and he was rather familiar with the many things that a responsible teenage boy would *not* want the adults in his life to know about.

Whatever Lan Jingyi had sent, it had prompted Wei Wuxian to ask about the camera function on the phone. Which had then led to an exploration of the many different ways that apps used the camera. Wei Wuxian had been *fascinated* by Wen Yuan's text-scanning app. And, after playing with it for a while, had gotten an unsettlingly thoughtful expression before he'd begun practically *grilling* Wen Yuan over how one created such programs. By the time Lan Wangji had retreated for the evening, the pair had been bent over Wen Yuan's computer science textbook.

It… wasn't entirely surprising. Wen Yuan had even noted the similarity between talisman design and programming; it made sense that Wei Wuxian would want to explore the possibilities. And he was *glad* that Wei Wuxian had found something that appealed so strongly to him in the modern world – something new and interesting to help anchor himself in the age of information technology.

He just was trying not to wonder too hard about what sort of programs the man might come up with.

In the meantime, he could see Nie Huaisang affecting a look that was *far* too innocent to be anything but the exact opposite. "Soooo," he drawled lazily, waving at the windows and the scenery flashing past. "I bet you can't go this fast even on a sword!"

Lan Wangji fought the urge to grit his teeth. This again. Nie Huaisang had not been the least bit subtle about pushing for a demonstration.

Granted, so had others. But at least Nie Mingjue had the excuse of needing the information for security purposes. Nie Huaisang was just being *nosy*.

And with all their prying, Lan Wangji felt like it would be rude to ask his own questions. Which just made it even more frustrating.

Wei Wuxian chuckled knowingly, clearly fully aware of what Nie Huaisang was up to, even as he lightly replied, "A sword can go faster."

Nie Huaisang hesitated for a moment, blinking. "…Really?" he asked, surprisingly artless.

Which… was a reaction that Lan Wangji had to reluctantly share. They weren't going at highway speeds by any measure; the tight turns as the road made its way down the mountain ensured that far beyond the speed limit. But speeds around 60 kilometers per hour were still

far beyond the reach of any form of ancient transportation, except perhaps for a boat on a fast-moving river.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Sometimes. It depends on many things!”

“Cultivation strength?” Nie Huaisang guessed.

In the rear view mirror, Lan Wangji saw Wei Wuxian nod. “That, yes, but also your training, your sword, how long you wish to go so fast… and the weather!” He tapped the glass of the window with a wry smile. “Also, if you know the… hm. Not the first seals to learn, but those that come after? Less necessary but useful?”

“Secondary,” Lan Wangji suggested, making himself focus on the road again.

He heard Wei Wuxian hum as he parsed the new word out, and then felt more than saw the man nod. “Secondary seals, then.” His voice was ruefully amused. “Eating bugs is not fun. And it hurts!”

Interesting. Lan Wangji had not considered that aspect of sword flight… but it did make sense that it would be more like cycling than driving; after a certain point, your speed would be limited by the environment and the need to shield the rider from wind and nuisances.

Although that implied that a sword could go *very* fast, indeed.

Not to mention, *flying*. Even if sword flight couldn’t go much faster than the car’s current speed, the simple fact that you could move in a straight line rather than being beholden to roads alone would make it an extremely *fast* mode of travel in terms of the real world. As demonstrated by the tricky set of turns he was making his way through, forcing him to keep his eyes and attention on the road…

Which meant he couldn’t watch Wei Wuxian’s reaction as the road rounded the final turn and almost immediately reached the turn onto the main expressway heading into the city. But he certainly heard the startled exclamation as Caiyi opened up in front of them, so much *bigger* from this angle than it always looked from the bird’s-eye view from Cloud Recesses.

Even so, he could imagine the wide-eyed expression. At Nie Huaisang’s suggestion, they’d left Cloud Recesses on one of the access roads normally used for deliveries, to avoid the protesters at the front gate; Wei Wuxian was aware of that situation in the abstract, but there was no reason to force the reality on him when the trip to Caiyi would be overwhelming enough.

And – as Nie Huaisang had flippantly noted – the people most likely to recognize a living Yiling Laozu were the ones who regularly drew fanart of him.

Strategically, it had been the wise decision… but it meant that Wei Wuxian’s first real introduction to the modern world beyond Cloud Recesses was the high-traffic expressway into Caiyi.

“That is…” Wei Wuxian started, and then paused, clearly sorting through his thoughts. “… impressive,” he concluded at last, as they picked up speed to merge into the traffic.

“You can just call it insanity,” Nie Huaisang said cheerfully. “The rest of us certainly do!”

Lan Wangji… was not going to dispute that. Particularly when he was busy watching the increasingly busy traffic as more and more vehicles crowded the road. A part of him genuinely wondered if there was some kind of quantum phenomenon that happened as the road entered the city proper; the traffic always seemed to multiply out of all proportion to the number of vehicles actually entering, as if congestion simply *manifested* in direct relation to proximity to the city center.

Nie Huaisang was still talking, something about being glad that they weren’t going to Beijing and Caiyi being fairly ordinary as modern cities went. Lan Wangji deliberately tuned him out, all of his attention on the road; it was taking all of his discipline to keep his grip on the steering wheel from going white-knuckled again, and for far more justifiable reason this time. Tame Caiyi might be in comparison to the massive metropolises of international fame, but there was a *reason* he always used the buses whenever he needed something that he couldn’t find at the farmers market held at the university.

He also avoided the downtown area simply out of a combination of principle and *self-preservation*.

There was one blessing: once they were off the expressway and onto city streets, the traffic inevitably slowed to a gridlocked crawl. With the car at a full stop as often as not, Lan Wangji felt as if he had a moment to actually *breathe* again.

A hint of movement in the mirror caught his eye, and he huffed a soft breath of combined sympathy and amusement. The car Nie Mingjue had arranged was relatively spacious – a necessity, given that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian were both significantly taller than the average. Even so, it was a bit… cramped. As evidenced by the interesting set of contortions that Wei Wuxian was going through, trying to look *up* through the windows at the skyscrapers lining the street around them.

Until he gave up entirely, and simply stretched out sideways across a startled Nie Huaisang’s lap to look out the opposite window instead.

Lan Wangji’s hands tightened – and then he had to abruptly brake as a cyclist took advantage of his half-second of hesitation to cut across the road in front of him with the confidence of a twenty-something who was utterly certain that mortality only happened to other people.

Behind him, Wei Wuxian chuckled softly. “Some things really don’t change, do they!” he said cheerfully, pulling himself upright again – apparently he’d braced himself on the back of the seat against the sudden jolt.

Lan Wangji drew in a deep breath and swallowed hard, forcing his heart out of his throat and back into his chest where it rightly belonged. “Wei Wuxian. Seatbelt.”

“Eh? …Ah! Sorry!” Out of the corner of his eye, Lan Wangji saw the man wriggle the shoulder strap back into place. Ah, so he hadn’t actually undone the belt, just slipped out of the shoulder strap, and the resulting slack had left the belt basically nonfunctional.

Part of him wanted to scold; he forced it down. Wei Wuxian had not grown up with cars, it would make sense that it would take him some time to adjust to them. And he had, at least, worn the belt in the first place. Lan Wangji had a sneaking suspicion that Nie Huaisang hadn’t.

And Wei Wuxian was leaning to the side again, to look through the front windshield at the buildings. “Those are *very* tall. Why?” he asked curiously.

An interesting question. Like many things that Wei Wuxian asked about, *why* skyscrapers were tall was something that had never crossed Lan Wangji’s mind; they simply were.

“In part, it is a problem of space,” he said after a moment. “For those who wish to live and work inside the city limits, there is only so much room, and land is expensive. So where possible, they build *up* instead.”

He heard Wei Wuxian hum in understanding. No doubt the man was familiar with the pattern; it was one that had existed throughout history, and would have been all the more pronounced in an age where cities required fortified walls for protection. To live outside the walls meant you were vulnerable to attack, but the walls themselves would have limited how many people could live there.

“Technology helps,” Nie Huaisang chirped. “Buildings could get a lot taller once we figured out how to build with steel instead of stone…”

“And once people *could*, people *did*,” Wei Wuxian chuckled knowingly. “And, I am guessing, many people trying to build the *tallest*, for bragging rights?”

Nie Huaisang cackled. “I love the fact that you already know that phrase.”

He did. Lan Wangji couldn’t even blame Wen Yuan for that; it had come up during a conversation about the relationships between cultivation sects, and there simply… had been no more accurate description.

Wei Wuxian laughed, but he was looking out the window again. “So! That is why and how – but what are they used for?”

That, Lan Wangji could answer. “The lower levels are often stores and restaurants, and then offices – places where people do work. The higher levels are often apartments – places where people live.”

“In this area, it’s mostly the first two, unless you have a lot of money,” Nie Huaisang added wryly. “But in other parts of the city, it’s not uncommon for some buildings to be nothing *but* apartments.”

Wei Wuxian paused. “That is *very many stairs* for going home,” he observed at last, and Lan Wangji could *hear* the dubious expression.

Nie Huaisang groaned. “It really, really is!” he agreed mournfully. “There was one time when the elevator in my building was broken for a *whole week*! And Dage said I had to keep going to class anyway! It was *college*, you’re *supposed* to skive, but *noooo*…” He sniffled dramatically. “I don’t think my legs ever recovered!”

Wei Wuxian was quiet for another long moment, probably trying to parse as much meaning as he could from the flurry of unfamiliar words. Finally, he asked, “Elevator?”

“Ah, right, you don’t know those. Hmmm…”

“It is… a form of carriage,” Lan Wangji offered. “It is designed to be lifted up and down inside the building, to help people move between levels.”

“Which is good,” Nie Huaisang added, “because let me tell you, the restaurants at the top of those things? Great view, but you couldn’t *pay* me to go up there without an elevator!”

A movement in the mirror – Wei Wuxian tilting his head. “How do you know what is there?” he asked.

“Oh, most places advertise online,” Nie Huaisang said breezily. “And the lower levels usually have signs showing what’s on the upper floors, if they’re businesses. Plus, well!” He waved at an excruciatingly pink neon sign.

Wei Wuxian eyed it with an expression that was an eloquent mixture of impressed, amused, and deeply disturbed. “What makes the colors?” he asked.

“Ah! And my preparation pays off again!” Nie Huaisang ostentatiously held up his phone and began reading. “So… basically, the color comes from different types of gases – kinds of air, more or less. Certain gases glow when an electrical current… Lan Wangji, there’s an open parking space in that garage, pull in!”

Startled, Lan Wangji looked up, seeing the sign just in time to signal the turn. Then he glanced at the car’s GPS navigation system and frowned. “We are still several blocks from our destination,” he objected, even as he made the turn. This was a weekday morning, so the traffic was not as dire as it could be – but finding a parking space would still not be *easy* by any means.

Nie Huaisang waved his hand. “But the whole point of this is to introduce him to the city! You really can’t get a better introduction than walking around downtown on foot. It will be *educational*.” Then he brightened. “Although, if you’re offering to just drop the two of us off at the building while you go park the car, I’m sure we can get started without you…”

It was a blatant provocation and Lan Wangji knew it. Nie Huaisang was not even *trying* to be subtle about needling him.

Lan Wangji turned into an open parking space and turned the car off. “We will walk,” he said flatly.

Opening his door he got out and – pointedly ignoring Nie Huaisang’s pout – walked around the car to open Wei Wuxian’s door for him. The cultivator grinned at him as he unfolded himself out of the seat, stretching out long limbs with an audible sigh of relief—

Immediately interrupted by a fit of startled coughing, one hand coming up to his nose in surprise.

Lan Wangji grimaced in sympathy. The smell of the parking garage was… *interesting*, heavy with gasoline and exhaust. How much more so for Wei Wuxian, who’d never encountered the smell of modern industry and had had no idea what to expect?

“The air will be better once we are outside,” he offered as Wei Wuxian recovered and lowered his hand again, although his nose was still wrinkled with distaste. It was a surprisingly *cute* expression.

“Not that much better, though,” Nie Huaisang added with brutal honesty. “Just be glad we’re not in one of the big industrial cities. At least you can breathe the air in Caiyi without feeling it shaving hours off your potential lifespan.”

Lan Wangji grimaced. At least they weren’t at the height of smog season, and the relatively cooler and drier air compared to coastal cities like Shanghai kept it from getting too bad, helped by the wind off the mountains. Still.

Reaching the street level exit, he took a moment to brace himself. With everything that had happened with the project, he had not actually gone off the campus grounds for some months. It had been some time since he’d dealt with city crowds.

Even with that preparation, stepping out onto the sidewalk was an almost physical shock, with the mass of people having its own currents and countercurrents trying to pull him back and forth. He nearly collided with three different people before he found a space that allowed him to begin moving in the right direction.

Wei Wuxian took one look at the crowd and quickly maneuvered himself around so that he was between Lan Wangji and the storefront side of the walk, shamelessly using Lan Wangji as a bulwark between himself and the mass of the crowds. Lan Wangji did not blame him in the least. If it had been a long time since *he’d* had to deal with crowds, it had been even longer for Wei Wuxian. And given that cultivators were usually armed, and at least nobility-adjacent, it was unlikely that anyone in his time would have carelessly shoulder-checked him out of their way the way one suited, briefcase-carrying man just had to Lan Wangji.

Well. Had *started* to, until the man’s hindbrain apparently registered just how much taller Lan Wangji was, and his straight, tall stance. At which point the man’s steps stuttered slightly as he abruptly decided that perhaps he should bowl over someone *else* in his rush to get wherever he was going.

There were occasional advantages to being unusually tall and reasonably athletic.

And Nie Huaisang simply swept through the crowds like a fish through calm waters, never even looking up from his phone.

"Now, those girls with the white shirts and dark skirts walking together? That's a school uniform, so they're probably classmates. But it's summer and most schools are closed! So either they're attending a summer prep school, or they're making a sly dig at the system." Nie Huaisang stepped smoothly around a mother with a stroller and added, "And the men in black suits? Those are usually working for businesses – basically merchants and their staff. Suits are tricky, because there's a whole range of people who wear them, and the differences are usually very subtle… Ooh, see that fellow? With the hint of dark green pinstripe on the black, and that *tie*? He's making a *statement*. Too young to be a power player, so probably an independent of some sort. Ah, that family over there, definitely not locals, you can see the way the parents are following their daughter…"

Lan Wangji blinked as Nie Huaisang continued. He'd never thought about half the things that the man was pointing out, subtle details of dress and bearing and even the pace of the people around them, but every observation and offhand comment found him mentally nodding agreement. He hadn't even been aware that he *noticed* more than half of the details that Nie Huaisang was breezily listing off, and yet every part of it rang true.

Next to him, he could feel some of the well-hidden tension coiled in Wei Wuxian ease as the man relaxed slightly. Which was odd; if anything, the crowds had gotten worse as they approached the first crosswalk and were forced to move into the thick of the press—

But Nie Huaisang is giving him the context to read *the crowd*, he realized a moment later. The cultural familiarity that had Lan Wangji nodding agreement to Nie Huaisang's words – Wei Wuxian would have had that in his own time. But here, in addition to the crowds themselves, the man was dealing with information overload, with no context to know how to parse what he *observed* into useable information.

He was a *very* quick study, though. Already… Lan Wangji had no idea *what* he'd done, but somehow, he'd adjusted his movements to the crowd until he was moving through the mass of people with more ease than Lan Wangji himself. And somehow, despite how very *alien* everything must seem, he managed to keep himself from staring any more than the various non-locals scattered through the crowd…

Because he is deliberately imitating *them*, Lan Wangji realized, as they passed the family that Nie Huaisang had pointed out and Wei Wuxian's gaze flickered towards them for a moment. Wei Wuxian had marked the people in the crowd who were unfamiliar with the city and was using their behavior as a model, to hide just *how* unfamiliar he found his surroundings.

Even so, the man was staying *very* close to Lan Wangji as the light changed and the crowd surged around them; they didn't so much step onto the crosswalk as they were *carried* there. Lan Wangji had to admit that he was relieved. The churn of the crowd would make it dangerously easy to get separated. Not to mention that, while they had discussed traffic signs and signals and the rules of navigating *thoroughly* the previous night, the current situation was deeply distracting and it would not be fair to expect Wei Wuxian to bear all their cautions in mind in the face of so much information overload…

Although Lan Wangji belatedly realized that Wei Wuxian was not the only one distracted, when he stepped off the road on the far side of the street and straight into the path of a teenager on a skateboard. He only managed to avoid a head-on collision by wrenching himself back and out of the way, grabbing Wei Wuxian and pulling him in without thinking and only realizing the heartbeat after that Wei Wuxian was a *combat veteran* and probably would not react well to being manhandled—

But the man didn't react, other than to catch his balance enough to keep the momentum from throwing both of them back into the street. He didn't even pull back from where Lan Wangji had unintentionally pulled the man against himself, too busy staring after the skateboarder with wide eyes. "Lan Zhan – what was that?"

Had he not seen… ah, no, he would not have. Skateboards were banned on Cloud Recesses grounds, for *very good reason!* "That was a skateboard," he said, careful to keep the distaste from his tone. "It is recreational…"

Wei Wuxian twisted to look up at him, gray eyes silver-bright with glee. "We should get one!"

"Ah…" Flustered, Lan Wangji hastily let go and stepped back slightly, so that their faces wouldn't be so very *close*. "Why?"

Wei Wuxian grinned. "We should get it so that Wen Yuan can practice sword balance!"

Lan Wangji blinked. On consideration… yes, he could understand the thought. There was indeed a certain similarity in the motion, and he could understand how the balance and… *thought process*, if that was the right concept, of maneuvering on a skateboard would require similar skills as sword flight…

Except that flight on a sword had *poise and dignity*. A skateboard was *anything but*.

"Oh, I'd *pay* to see that!" Nie Huaisang materialized from somewhere in the crowd, hooking Wei Wuxian's arm with his own to pull the man back into motion and out of the worst of the crowd. "Which reminds me, we should make sure to get you some proper athletic clothes! I'm sure what you have works, but people expect certain clothes with certain activities, and honestly, athleisure is a style I'm pretty sure you could pull off *very* nicely…"

Lan Wangji froze as his brain suddenly assaulted him with the mental image of Wei Wuxian in form-hugging gymnastics clothing, and nearly lost the two in the crowd before he managed to get himself moving again.

"I do not understand why we must go to a *tailor*," he… yes, he would be honest, he was growling. Although the statement was as much a desperate attempt to shift the subject away from the dangerous waters it had entered as it was his – genuine – irritation with Nie Huaisang's high-handed hijacking of the day's itinerary.

Still tugging the clearly amused Wei Wuxian along, Nie Huaisang waved a flippant hand before returning to scrolling through his social media or whatever it was that kept the man glued to the screen of his phone. "Several reasons! First and foremost, you and Wen Qing

were *entirely* correct about the importance of clothing to control first impressions and how our friend here will be treated. However, while the outfit you provided him is excellent – my compliments to Wen Yuan and his friend – it won't be *enough*. He'll need a proper suit as well, at bare minimum, and it takes *time* to make a bespoke suit! If we wait for everything to go public, it will be far too late. You have to plan these things in advance, you know!"

Lan Wangji pressed his lips together. On general principles, yes, Nie Huaisang had a very good point. Still. "There are other means of acquiring a suit," he said flatly. Means that would be far less expensive, and more importantly would not involve the risk of revealing Wei Wuxian's existence to a complete outsider for frivolous purposes!

Nie Huaisang looked over his shoulder, casually running his eyes over Lan Wangji from head to toe. And *smirked*. "Well, that explains a few things," he said cryptically.

"This tailor. It is a matter of status, correct?" Wei Wuxian said unexpectedly.

Nie Huaisang blinked, taken aback, and Wei Wuxian tilted his head to indicate the crowd. "The suits – as you said, the differences are… subtle? Meaning difficult to notice? But the people who wear suits that are made for them, they walk like people who have power."

Nie Huaisang grinned. "Oh, you're *good*. Yes, that's part of it. But also?" He huffed, gesturing at his own clothing, which even Lan Wangji could see managed to look both formal in a classic style but also distinctly fashionable. "Let me let you both in on a little secret: *everyone* who can afford it gets their clothing tailored, or at least adjusted. Because the clothes you buy in stores? They're designed to fit as many people as possible – which means they don't fit anyone *well*." He snickered. "Besides. You're *way* too tall for most brands! How much of your wardrobe do you get online or by special order, Professor Lan?"

He was… not wrong, Lan Wangji had to admit. Reluctantly. Although it had never occurred to him to get the clothing he purchased *adjusted* after the fact…

The sly look Nie Huaisang gave him then did not help. "Besides. Imagine Wei Wuxian walking into the average clothing store."

Lan Wangji did not blanch. But he was acutely aware of how very *helpful* the staff of such stores were when *he* walked into one – and he was well aware that he was not particularly approachable.

And that didn't even get into the problem of option shock, or the fact that Wei Wuxian had no idea about the differences in men's and women's fashion beyond what he had been able to observe for himself. He would have *so many questions*.

Much as he disliked it… Nie Huaisang had a point. This trip was meant to be a first introduction to modern urban life – not a deep dive into some of its most stressful foibles. The traffic and crowds were bad enough for one day.

So, reluctantly, Lan Wangji followed Nie Huaisang as he led them at last out of the crowds and into an elegantly appointed lobby on the ground floor of one of the high rise buildings.

Wei Wuxian relaxed subtly as they left the crowd behind, looking around with interest as they walked across the lobby. Lan Wangji saw the man's eyes linger on the patterned marble tiles, the glass doors and gold lettering of the ground floor businesses, the polished dark wood paneling and stone-faced columns of the walls, clearly marking the differences from the architecture he'd seen. No doubt marking the signs that all declared that this was a place of tasteful wealth.

Lan Wangji certainly was. He was beginning to have a sinking feeling about this tailor Nie Huaisang had insisted they visit.

If Wei Wuxian had not been coping so *well* with everything – or at least hiding his reactions – Lan Wangji might not have noticed the moment he balked as the elevator doors opened, an unexpected moment of hesitation as Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji stepped past and inside.

Oh. Suddenly, Lan Wangji found himself looking at the elevator car with new eyes, seeing it as Wei Wuxian would: a tiny space with heavily reinforced walls and doors, the only way out being the way they'd come in. Even with the glass mirrors and paneling on the walls, it was a box, a *cell*, with the only sound being the hum of machinery.

Wei Wuxian's eyes darted sideways for a moment, towards the security guard that Lan Wangji hadn't even noticed, sitting at a desk on one side of the lobby. Not paying more than cursory attention to them yet, but any strange behavior and that could quickly change—

Wei Wuxian strolled into the elevator just as the doors began to close, the only indication of his unease a hidden sharpness in his eyes and the tensing of his shoulders as the doors closed behind him.

Then he started as the elevator began to rise, reflexively looking down at his feet and then up at the ceiling before his face suddenly brightened.

"Ah! This is an… elevator, was the word?"

"Yes! A very, very nice one," Nie Huaisang said brightly, phone tapping his upper lip as he watched the numbers cycling upwards. Outwardly. But Lan Wangji was surprised to see the man's eyes dart sideways to watch Wei Wuxian with hidden concern, and he had the sudden feeling that he was not the only one mentally kicking himself for not considering how utterly *unsettling* an elevator car would be to someone who had never experienced such a thing before. "You should check that lovely inventions book Wen Yuan got you, when we get back. Elevators like this one were invented…" His eyes darted to the phone for a half-second, and Lan Wangji suddenly realized Nie Huaisang had been typing a search as he talked. "…almost two hundred years ago," he finished, without so much as a hint of hesitation.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "A while, then!" he said, tilting his head back and forth, probably trying to locate the source of the humming of the machinery.

He *seemed* at ease again… but Lan Wangji was learning to get a sense of the man's masks, and he suspected that there would be pointed questions about the location of the stairs when their business was finished.

Although that would be a very long walk down, given that the elevator only stopped on the fifteenth floor.

And now Lan Wangji's sinking feeling about the tailor they were going to see had gotten worse, because while he would never claim to be as informed on fashion and style as Nie Huaisang seemed to be, it was very clear that this was not someone that people found by accident.

Especially when the door Nie Huaisang chose boasted no more than a simple nameplate declaring *Gao Huiqing, Tailor*, and opened it to reveal an elegantly appointed foyer with comfortable seating, a side counter with service for tea and coffee, and a large picture window across the length of one wall featuring a glorious view of the city.

Lan Wangji might not know much about the lives of the wealthy and powerful, but he was acutely aware that an office with a view like that would *not* be cheap.

"Nie Huaisang," he said flatly, stopping in the doorway. Because they did have *some* budget for this, yes, but contrary to the impression given by far too many movies and television series, academe was not exactly swimming with money… and what they did have came almost entirely from grants that would require them to report where every penny went.

He was confident that they could justify the purchase of a basic wardrobe and *some* more formal clothing as an unexpected but necessary expense, or even cover the cost out of pocket if needed. But there was no way that hiring the services of a clearly high-end and *expensive* tailor would be seen as anything but an utterly frivolous misappropriation of funds… which was exactly the sort of thing that could be used to justify wresting control of the project away from them!

Wei Wuxian had immediately gone to the window, taking in the view of the city, but he quickly turned to look at Lan Wangji, clearly picking up on the tension in his tone. But Nie Huaisang – the very one who had been *warning* them about the project's conduct inviting interference! – just blithely waved a hand. "Oh, I'm sure it will be fine! Lan Qiren okayed it, after all!"

Lan Wangji had *serious* doubts about that.

Unfortunately… if Nie Huaisang had made the arrangements for this, then the expense had already been incurred. The only thing that walking out would achieve would be to leave the project with a cancellation fee as well. So, with a sigh, Lan Wangji stepped inside and let the door close behind him.

Nie Huaisang was already headed for the door in the back of the waiting room. "You two settle in, I'll let him know we're here!"

Nie Huaisang was still mentally snickering to himself as he walked into the office room where Gao Huiqing did his consultations to find the tailor waiting for him. Really, Lan Wangji had talent. He hadn't even known it was *possible* to simply radiate *I find every aspect of your existence inherently untrustworthy* without actually changing your expression!

Which, really, he'd like a little gratitude here! He had pulled *quite* a few strings to set this appointment up, and getting a sight-unseen, no names named consultation with an artisan of Gao Huiqing's caliber was *not* easy. And they were lucky that Caiyi had such a successful arts community to tap into, and a strong sense of regional pride; this whole business would have been much trickier if he'd had to reach out as far as the big metropolitan centers like Beijing or Shanghai.

Gao Huiqing looked up from his computer. "Nie Huaisang," he said, almost as flatly as Lan Wangji himself. Which, ow. If Nie Huaisang hadn't thickened his skin dealing with so many grumpy Lans recently he might actually have been hurt by such an unwelcoming attitude!

Well, granted, the man did have some reason to be *slightly* irritated. Some of his string-pulling had included more than a few hard *yanks*, especially to ensure the whole "no names named" aspect. After all, part of what put Gao Huiqing in such high demand was his discretion regarding his clients. Refusing to even give the name of his new client in advance was an insult to the man's professionalism.

Which was part of why Nie Huaisang had done it that way, of course. All a matter of balancing insult against *intrigue*, and piquing the right level of curiosity. After all, Gao Huiqing *had* the clientele he did in part because he enjoyed being in on secrets.

So he intentionally notched the flutter up a bit. Just for the fun of it. "Master Gao, I'm *so* grateful to you for making the time for us!" he gushed. "Especially given such irregular circumstances – but I'm sure you understand that secrecy in this matter is *essential*…"

Gao Huiqing huffed impatiently. "I have already agreed to keep this consultation confidential," he said brusquely. "Yiling Laozu himself could rise from the dead and walk through that door and I would not speak a word of it."

Oh. Ooh. *Oooooh!* Oh, Nie Huaisang owed his ancestors something *nice* the next time Qingming rolled around, because he could not have *asked* for a better opening line than that!

With a quick tap, he queued up the file. Getting Dage's permission to load it on his phone had genuinely been the hardest part of the plan, and he'd promised that he would delete it and wipe the data the moment this was done. Which was unfortunate, but then again, he of all people didn't want it getting out before the popcorn was ready. "Excellent!" he trilled – honestly, this obsequious aide persona was fun, he'd have to use it again sometime – and held out the phone. "Now, this is just a short video, but once you see it I'm sure you'll understand our concerns…"

He waited until the man actually started the video, and then he let the shark's smile out to play.

Dage was right. Once you'd been through the first shock, there really was *nothing* like the thrill of inflicting it on someone else.

Gao Huiqing didn't even move as the video ended, just sat gaping at the screen even as it dimmed and shut off. Amused, Nie Huaisang plucked the phone out of the tailor's hand, and only *then* did he blink and come back to himself.

"…Yiling Laozu," he said weakly.

Nie Huaisang held his phone up to cover the lower half of his face – not that it would do much to hide the smirk. "I'm sure you understand our need for absolute discretion," he said mildly, twirling one of the charm tassels with his index finger. "As well as the need for a new wardrobe! I'm afraid that what he has is a little… dated."

Gao Huiqing nodded numbly, and then visibly shook himself and nodded again, more briskly this time. "I… would imagine so, yes. So you are looking for a full wardrobe, then. Not simply formalwear for public appearances."

Excellent. The man was still in shock, but he was falling back into his professionalism to handle it. That had really been the biggest gamble in this scheme; there really was no way to predict how someone would take everything.

"Ideally, yes," he said, and fiddled with his phone *just* a little awkwardly, to sell the next bit. "Although, we probably will need to prioritize the formalwear? He'll need something *special* when the time comes to make everything public. We can make do for everyday clothing if we have to – after all, Wei Wuxian isn't familiar with modern fashions…" *Here, fishie fishie fishie…*

Hah. As he'd expected, Gao Huiqing's lips pursed in professional distaste at the idea of *making do*. "I can at least give you recommendations within your budget," he said stiffly – but he seemed oddly distracted, and a moment later, almost tentatively, he asked, "Wei Wuxian?"

Nie Huaisang blinked guilelessly. "Yiling Laozu isn't actually his *name*, you realize."

After all, that was the practical reason he'd pushed so hard for no-names-named for this appointment. Anyone who saw *Yiling Laozu* on the appointment request would have thrown it out as a prank, and "Wei Wuxian" didn't actually *exist* yet, legally.

Ah, and there was the stunned, slightly star-struck look again, as it started sinking in that yes, they really were talking about an actual *person*. A person that Gao Huiqing was about to meet.

Nie Huaisang waited, though. After all, he'd established now that he was willing to answer questions – and he'd been very insistent on showing the *full* footage of Wei Wuxian waking out of the ice.

Granted, once he'd gotten past the hurdle of showing the footage at all, his brother hadn't fussed too much about it. After all, Nie Mingjue categorically hated formal clothes for a reason.

"In the video," Gao Huiqing said at last, very carefully. "He appeared to have…" He made a vague grabbing motion to the air in front of his chest, echoing that physics-defying bullet catch.

Bait, hook and sinker! This time, Nie Huaisang was careful to actually hide his smirk, if only in solidarity. “If you’re asking if he’s a real cultivator, powers and all… why yes, he is. You should have seen the faces the first time his sword moved on its own!”

Not that he’d seen those expressions either, the security feed of that confrontation wasn’t great. But Nie Mingjue’s smirk at the mere memory told him that they’d been *epic*.

“So I’m sure that you understand the need for some… extra attention regarding formalwear,” he said lightly. “Wei Wuxian is someone who is accustomed to moving *very quickly* when needed.” He paused. “Not always on the ground.”

Okay, there really was something hilariously charming about a grown man revert to the sparkling eyes of an awestruck five-year-old.

And this was one of the reasons why Nie Huaisang had wanted Gao Huiqing. Because it wasn’t normally part of the man’s professional life, but Nie Huaisang happened to know that the man was a closet fanboy, if one with style.

Rather literally so. He couldn’t confirm, but he was *quite* sure that Gao Huiqing had had a hand in those lovely replica robes that Wen Yuan had found for Wei Wuxian. If only in the form of cheering the creator on, offering some reference material, and possibly helping source some of the fabric.

He couldn’t *wait* to see the reaction when the man found out Wei Wuxian had acquired one of the replicas.

Still. One more bit of groundwork. “Still, your advice on everyday wear would be appreciated. You see, for obvious reasons we don’t want to go public just yet. But he *does* need to get out and learn about the modern world – today is his first trip into the city! So…”

Gao Huiqing nodded briskly. “So first you will need clothing that will allow him to blend in and not be recognized. In fact, I recommend that we find two styles that will suit him, one for when he is in his public identity and another for when he wishes privacy.” To Nie Huaisang’s slight surprise, the man smiled wryly. “I have worked with clients who had fame happen *to* them before. I do understand how valuable the ability to be inconspicuous can be.”

Hah! *We*. Gao Huiqing might not have *officially* signed on for more than a fitting, but it was obvious that he was already invested. Excellent.

Not that he’d had any doubts; this was not exactly an opportunity that would ever strike again. But he did so love seeing a plan play out.

Nie Huaisang snickered at his own sense of deja vu. “I think *inconspicuous* may be a tall order, for multiple reasons,” he said wryly. “We may have to settle for blending in. Fortunately, he’s quite adaptable.”

Gao Huiqing paused for just a second, and Nie Huaisang could *see* him packing the stunned, star struck reaction underneath the professional artisan. Nice trick, and one the tailor probably

had a great deal of practice in. Then he nodded to himself and gestured for Nie Huaisang to precede him back into the waiting room.

Lan Wangji had settled in one of the chairs – although *settled* was really not the right word for that ramrod straight, picture-perfect posture; it was practically an insult to what was clearly a very comfortable chair. Wei Wuxian, meanwhile, had draped himself over the back of the chair like a particularly lazy cat so that he could peer over Lan Wangji's shoulder at…

"You brought a *dead tree map*?" Nie Huaisang spluttered, genuinely appalled. What sort of child of the internet *was* this man? "What do you think *phones* are for?"

"Phoning," Lan Wangji said, utterly deadpan.

Okay, now that was not fair. Who would have thought Lan Wangji had a jab like that in him?

Wei Wuxian was laughing at them both, eyes bright and dancing with amusement. Nie Huaisang huffed at him, wrinkling his nose in annoyance, and just got another one of those brilliant smiles for his trouble. Admittedly, not a bad consolation prize, but still.

"Seriously, though!" he insisted. "Wei Wuxian used a phone for the first time last night, and he's *already* savvier about technology than you!"

Lan Wangji's exhale was just emphatic enough that Nie Huaisang figured he was justified in scoring it as an exasperated sigh. "The phone's screen is not large enough."

"That's what the *give me directions* function is for," Nie Huaisang countered.

"Not when one wishes to see the overall layout."

Oh. Huh. Nie Huaisang glanced at Wei Wuxian. "Looking for what's left of the old Caiyi?"

"Yep!" Wei Wuxian shrugged wryly. "There is not much. I expected that! Fifteen hundred years is a very long time. But I was curious."

"Not much, but not nothing," Lan Wangji said. "The historic canal district near the lake may have some remnants."

"Then once we're done here, you should pay it a visit!" Nie Huaisang said brightly. "Let him see the part of the city that *isn't* an urban jungle. But in the meantime…" He clapped his hands, grinning cheerfully. "Introductions! Gentlemen, this is Gao Huiqing, who has generously agreed to assist us with our clothing… situation."

"And you, I assume, are Wei Wuxian," Gao Huiqing said, opting for a formal bow rather than a more casual handshake. "I look forward to working with you." As he spoke, his eyes flickered over the man, taking in the fact that Wei Wuxian stood a good ten centimeters taller than him, the lean and athletic physique, the striking features, bright grey eyes and absolutely *dazzling* smile, and cast an amused look at Nie Huaisang. "And I see your point about the issue with *inconspicuous*," he said wryly, before turning his attention to Lan Wangji. "And you are?"

“Lan Wangji,” the man said, face flat as ever. “I am a professor at the university, and currently assisting Wei Wuxian in adapting to the modern world.”

Nie Huaisang made two mental notes. First, they *desperately* needed to work with Lan Wangji on his stage presence. Second… they needed to workshop a proper title for his position. Something catchy and *short*, that people would remember. Because that was *not* going to fly in front of the cameras. In the meantime… “He’s also the second fitting that I requested,” he said with a smirk.

And found himself looking potential murder, or at least maiming, squarely in the golden eye. “*What*.”

“This is *image management*, Professor Lan!” he said cheerfully, because really, *Nie Mingjue* was his brother, he was hardly going to be rattled by a murderous stare or two. “What people see the first time Wei Wuxian appears in public officially? That is going to be the image that shapes their *idea* of this, and the way they imagine the *story*. And that means we want you right there with him, so that everyone gets the idea that you’re a matched set lodged all the way back in the hindbrain where logic need not apply, and if anyone even *suggests* snatching Wei Wuxian from the project, housewives the world over will be grabbing their pearls and their kitchen knives.”

Wei Wuxian snickered at that – although there was something oddly complicated about his smile. It made Nie Huaisang wonder – had the cultivator been in a situation like this before? It was possible; the strategies and weapons may have changed, but jockeying for power and influence and control and *image*? Nothing new under the sun in that.

Well, hopefully that at least meant he appreciated how much effort Nie Huaisang was putting into this, because going by Lan Wangji’s flat, unimpressed stare, he was *clueless* about how important this was!

So Nie Huaisang deployed his backup. “I mean, I don’t know, you don’t *have* to, if it bothers you that much. Although Wei Wuxian should really have *someone* there to help him, you wouldn’t send him out to face a bunch of cameras and reporters *alone*, would you?” He tapped the edge of his phone against his cheek. “Although I suppose I could do it, it does technically count as part of what you hired me for…”

Lan Wangji’s stare somehow managed to become even flatter, which was genuinely impressive. A man of many talents! “Very well,” he said. “What does this fitting entail?”

Gao Huiqing nodded, as if Nie Huaisang hadn’t just handed him the *best job ever* in the form of a matched set of gorgeous subjects to show his handiwork upon – really, what did a man have to do for some appreciation around here? – and gestured to the door leading to the consultation room. “I believe I can find a style that will suit you,” he said. “If you will come this way?”

As the tailor went to pull out the privacy screen, Nie Huaisang decided he’d poke the bear just a *little* more. “Professor Lan, perhaps you might go first, and let Wei Wuxian watch? So that he knows what to expect and all!”

Ooh, score another dirty look! But Lan Wangji did sigh and step over to the fitting area, but not actually behind the screen, without a word of complaint. Nie Huaisang supposed he'd gotten used to playing human model during the early days when they'd barely been able to communicate, for medical checkups and such…

…Ooor maybe Lan Wangji was not entirely opposed to taking advantage of an excuse to take his shirt off in front of a certain someone. Because wow. If Nie Huaisang had a physique like that, he'd flaunt it, too! Not a bodybuilder, and certainly not the sort of chiseled superhero look that came from dehydration for the sake of the cameras, but despite Lan Wangji's slender build there was some real muscle on that frame.

Gao Huiqing was a consummate professional, moving the measuring tape around with brisk efficiency that made embarrassment practically impossible, as he asked Lan Wangji a series of questions regarding his thoughts on material, style, colors and such. Questions that Lan Wangji only answered with monosyllables until finally, Gao Huiqing stepped back, crossed his arms over his chest, and fixed Lan Wangji with a flat stare that rivaled the scholar's own.

"Professor Lan," he said sternly, but with a hint of amusement that made Nie Huaisang suspect that this was not his first reluctant client, "my job is to make you look good. The most flattering cut in the world, however, will not look *good* if you dislike synthetics, are allergic to wool, find bright colors distracting, or prefer a loose fit for your sleeves. No one looks good if they are *uncomfortable*. So I need your preferences as well as your measurements to do my job correctly."

Lan Wangji blinked, just once. His expression didn't even twitch other than that, but after a moment he tilted his head slightly. "I prefer light colors," he said at last, in response to the question he'd not-answered a moment before. "White. Pale blue. Not light grey, however."

Gao Huiqing hummed, nodding. "Light grey is very difficult to wear well, I agree. Are more vivid tones acceptable as underlayers or accents…?"

Once that hurdle had been crossed, the rest of the fitting went quickly, and soon Gao Huiqing was jotting a few final notes into his tablet as Lan Wangji buttoned his shirt back into place.

"You have an excellent sense of style and color for yourself; we can maintain something along the lines of what you have already established, although I will be making recommendations for some alternative suppliers who I believe you will find suit you better than your current ones. However, Mister Nie is quite correct: you will be best served by custom formalwear, given your situation."

One corner of the consultation room was occupied by a small table and a shelf of custom-bound volumes that proved to be portfolios of high-quality photos that seemed to have been taken from magazines and professional shoots. Gao Huiqing selected a handful and placed them on the table before turning to look sternly at Lan Wangji again. "I want you to go through these and select at least five styles that appeal to you."

Lan Wangji pursed his lips slightly, but settled into one of the chairs next to the table with all the dignity of an offended cat.

Wei Wuxian had watched the proceedings with his usual bright interest, and when Gao Huiqing turned to him – apparently satisfied that Lan Wangji was treating his assignment with the appropriate level of seriousness – he bounced up from where he had been leaning against the wall. “My turn?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes. We can go behind the screen, if you prefer,” Gao Huiqing offered.

Wei Wuxian shrugged as he pulled off the loose white button-up he’d been wearing over his shirt like a kind of overrobe. “I feel like I should not be in front of other people already,” he chuckled. “It seems very silly to worry about it now!”

Not to mention that he *also* very clearly had nothing to be ashamed of. Lan Wangji was fit; Wei Wuxian was for all intents and purposes a professional athlete, and it showed.

Although even a professional athlete would probably blanch at that collection of scars. *Yikes*. Had Nie Huaisang mentioned recently that he was *very* glad that he lived in an age where your enemies generally only set out to destroy you financially and socially? Sure, fates worse than death, yadda yadda, but dead was *dead*.

And that wasn’t even getting into the mess on the man’s back, which was an entirely different color of *yikes*. Yes, he’d read about that sort of thing, but…

Huh. A quick swipe-and-tap on his phone, and Nie Huaisang jotted a quick note. Because they’d covered history and technology and medicine, and excursions like this would help with culture and daily life… But they definitely needed to give Wei Wuxian a heads-up on politics, society, and how the law worked – on paper and in actual practice. Especially since he’d lived in a time where there essentially *was* no real law outside the dictates of individual power brokers within their own sphere of influence, no higher authority to appeal to if they abused those powers except maybe peer pressure from the next lord over.

Gao Huiqing had to have noticed the scars as well, but he didn’t react. Instead, he asked, “You feel under-dressed? Can you be more specific? Is the fabric not heavy enough, or is it a matter of layers? Or maybe the length?”

“Ah…” Wei Wuxian seemed to consider that as he held his arms out to let the man start taking measurements. “It is not the fabric. The fabric you use today is very good!”

Gao Huiqing nodded. “So it is the lack of layers and the length. I am familiar with the design of clothing from your time—”

Yes, Nie Huaisang would just *bet* he was. Granted, clothing *was* the man’s profession, it would make sense that he’d be well-versed in its history.

“—and I believe I can create designs that would feel similar, for formalwear. Everyday clothing may be more difficult. I assume you are not familiar with modern styles, if this is your first trip to Caiyi…”

“Clothes are… different now, yes,” Wei Wuxian noted with a wry smile. “I have noticed! But if that is what people wear, I will need to… hm. To change what I expect?”

Gao Huiqing pursed his lips. “I’m sure we can come up with something acceptable,” he said stiffly, and Nie Huaisang did *not* indulge in evil cackling but he was definitely going to later. Wei Wuxian probably hadn’t *intended* to wave a red flag at the bull, but it was clear that Gao Huiqing was taking this as a challenge. “In the meantime, it will help to establish what your preferences in general are. Am I correct that you tend to be…” He hesitated. “…very active? You prefer clothing that will not make it difficult to move?”

Wei Wuxian cast a sidelong glance over his shoulder, openly amused. “You can ask. Yes, flying on the sword is a Thing.”

For just a moment, Gao Huiqing *froze*, eyes wide and suspiciously starry.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, glancing at Nie Huaisang and Lan Wangji. “Why is that the thing that everyone wishes to ask about?”

Nie Huaisang spluttered, waving his hands in disbelief. “Because it’s *flying*! On a *sword*!”

“It is an ability that…appeals to many,” Lan Wangji admitted.

Nie Huaisang huffed at him. “Don’t you pretend you’re any different. I *saw* you twitch when he said a skateboard might be a good training tool.” Granted, probably because the man considered himself too *dignified* for skateboards, but still!

Wei Wuxian tilted his head as Gao Huiqing shook himself slightly and returned to taking measurements. “I meant to ask. No one seems to carry swords now, is that correct?”

“Pretty much,” Nie Huaisang admitted. “I mean, for one thing, most of us aren’t fast enough to dodge bullets, so swords sort of… weren’t so helpful after a while. These days they tend to be decorative, or used for exercise.”

Wei Wuxian huffed. “So to find one who can make a sword for cultivating is something that may not happen,” he concluded wryly.

“It’s probably unlikely,” Nie Huaisang concluded ruefully. And cackled internally, because he’d hoped to steer the conversation in this direction!

“There are some artisans who still practice traditional sword-making,” Lan Wangji noted, looking up from the images he’d been not-scowling at. “They may have preserved at least part of the craft unawares. And some heirloom swords may possibly have survived… but if so, they are likely not in a useable condition, and access would be limited,” he admitted. “Are specially made blades necessary?”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Necessary, no,” he said. “After all, if they were *necessary*, then what would the first cultivators have used?” He hummed, tapping a finger against his cheek as Gao Huiqing paused to take notes, not even *pretending* he wasn’t listening avidly. “Still. They do help,” he admitted. “They make early steps easier. More simple.”

“And the early steps are the ones you want to be simple if you’re going to be teaching raw newbies,” Nie Huaisang agreed casually, and graciously pretended he didn’t see Gao

Huiqing's eyes widen at *teaching*. "Well, maybe Lan Wangji can dig something out of his dusty old archives. Or… I don't suppose you know anything about the process?"

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Simple things. I mostly know what one should *not* do."

Lan Wangji was frowning slightly. "Are there other tools or supplies that you will require?"

Nie Huaisang ducked behind his phone to hide a smirk.

"Hm!" Wei Wuxian tapped his cheek again, thinking. "Paper and ink, but I do not know how it has changed. Instruments for music." He chuckled. "At least your tea is good. Before, it was not easy to get tea that good. It was expensive!"

Nie Huaisang grinned. "Wait until you try coffee."

Wei Wuxian grimaced. "I have," he said dryly. "That is… how did Wen Yuan say it? Ah. A hard pass."

Nie Huaisang and Gao Huiqing both gaped at him, although from the hint of amusement on Lan Wangji's part, he'd already known about this *travesty*. "You don't like *coffee*?"

"It is *bitter*," Wei Wuxian said with a shudder. "*No*." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the topic. "But tools… It is not a tool, but robes – many sects added wards to the outside robes, for protection."

Gao Huiqing's eyes went even wider at that, and Nie Huaisang saw the man's fingers twitch on the stylus he was holding. But he cleared his throat and simply said, "I apologize for the interruption, but… if you want to be comfortable moving, it would help to see your range of motion."

"Similar to what you and Nie Mingjue did in the first medical exam," Lan Wangji supplied when Wei Wuxian glanced at him for clarification.

Wei Wuxian nodded and obligingly let Gao Huiqing direct him through a series of stretches that… okay, that maybe wasn't circus-performer levels of obscene but it was at least ballet dancer levels. Which made sense in terms of muscle control and strength, but still. Clearly there was no fairness in the universe.

Although watching the way Lan Wangji was attempting to simultaneously *not* watch and still trying to stab Gao Huiqing with his eyes made up for it!

"Hm. So you will need either loose-fitting clothing that can accommodate, or fitted material that will stretch as needed," Gao Huiqing murmured, jotting some more notes. "The former would be more like the clothing you are familiar with, but would you like to experiment with the latter?" He smiled wryly. "I assure you that I will keep the designs in line with your preferences for modesty."

"Modesty…?" Undershirt back in place, Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Wangji, who murmured something. The cultivator laughed in response before he turned back to Gao Huiqing, rueful amusement sparkling in his eyes. "I knew many who would say I did not have modesty… but

it appears that I do," he said sheepishly as he finished shrugging the button-up back on. "But… yes. I will at least try."

Gao Huiqing nodded, then set his tablet aside and went to a cabinet behind his desk. "Next is material," he explained, pulling out several large collections of fabric swatches. "Look through these and tell me if there is a material or a color that particularly appeals to you, or that you don't like." He hesitated, eyeing the heavy bun that was Wei Wuxian's go-to method of hiding his hair in public. "Ah… I should have asked. Your hair is long – do you prefer it up like that, or loose? I know that in the ice…" He hesitated, obviously feeling awkward about referring to that.

Wei Wuxian lightly touched the bun. "I prefer… up and loose, I think it would be? But I know that long hair is not common. It would be noticeable, which we do not want, correct?"

"We do not want to draw attention for now," Lan Wangji said. "But… eventually it will not matter as much."

Gao Huiqing nodded. "As I said to Professor Lan, you will not look good if you are uncomfortable. It will be best to start with a style that you find familiar and comfortable first. Would you be willing to show me your preferred style?"

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows, but shrugged and reached back to pull out the hairstick holding the bun in place – Nie Huaisang freely admitted that he had *no* idea how that even worked, given that Wei Wuxian's hair had to be close to a meter long!

It did make for a very *distinctive* look, especially after Wei Wuxian retied it into the high tail he'd had in the ice. Distinctive and *dramatic*; by the time Gao Huiqing had directed him through a series of motions to observe how Wei Wuxian moved to keep that long black banner out of the way and sent him back to looking at the fabric samples, the tailor's eyes were glinting with the focused enthusiasm of a man with *plans*.

"Regarding formalwear," he said, looking at Nie Huaisang after he finished jotting a few notes, while Wei Wuxian bundled his hair up again. "For Professor Lan, I believe that a classic design will suit your purposes, and he would carry it well. But for Wei Wuxian, I assume you would like something more striking. A blend of modern and historic?"

Nie Huaisang grinned. "Well, any occasion involving formalwear is going to be after the big reveal goes public, so we might as well lean into it and find him something with *character*." He turned his phone around to show Gao Huiqing the photo he'd pulled up. "We did get him this, for when he has to deal with the rest of the project on an official basis."

Not that they'd really gotten the chance to leverage it, given everything that had gone down immediately after.

Gao Huiqing's eyebrows shot upward. "Ah," he said, stepping closer to study the photo. "I believe I am familiar with that designer. Yes, that is a good look; indisputably modern, but it clearly evokes the aesthetic and *sense* of the robes. A good choice." He turned to Wei Wuxian, who was holding up a piece of near-sheer white fabric shot through with gold thread with a bemused expression. "These clothes. Did you find them comfortable?"

Wei Wuxian smiled. “Yes!” he said brightly. “Very comfortable. The cloth is very nice.”

To Nie Huaisang’s great amusement, Lan Wangji frowned at the man, then turned to Gao Huiqing. “The jacket is tight across his shoulders,” he said.

Gao Huiqing raised an eyebrow at Wei Wuxian’s sheepish smile, then looked at Nie Huaisang. “May I?” he asked, and after Nie Huaisang handed his phone over with a grin, took a minute to study the photo more closely, zooming in for a better look. “Ah, I see the issue,” he said at last. “If you can bring it in, I believe I can adjust it to fit more comfortably.” He studied the photo a moment longer, then handed it back to Nie Huaisang and looked at Wei Wuxian. “Are there colors that you prefer? I believe this was based on your original clothing – but modern dyes allow us many options.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, looking down at the piles of fabric in front of him. Somehow, Nie Huaisang wasn’t surprised to note that most of the synthetic materials had been set aside as rejects, but the man clearly had a – heh – *soft* spot for blended fabrics and knits. Although the latter was probably partially a function of the air conditioning in the office, even if Gao Huiqing at least kept his at a less aggressive setting than some. “I noticed!” he said, picking up a swatch of deep, vivid purple and waving it in amusement. “Before, this color? It was *very* expensive. I know! A piece this big? No one would leave it unused!” He studied it for a long moment, running his fingers over the fabric with an odd sort of wistful look before shaking his head and firmly setting it aside in the reject pile.

“If you like the color, you should ask for it,” Lan Wangji said, a hint of furrow on his brow; apparently he’d noticed that odd look as well. “Do not concern yourself with cost.”

…huh. Flicking away from his email to his notes, Nie Huaisang tapped in a few reminders. Because come to think of it, right now Wei Wuxian had no income and no funds outside the project providing for him and that definitely wasn’t a good look. Bare minimum, they should make sure he was getting a good contractor’s fee for the work he was doing on defusing the archives, and that would also be a good opportunity to introduce him to modern economics and money. Although they’d have to handle that carefully to avoid opening themselves up to accusations of exploitation, but frankly they were going to have to navigate that chink in their ethical armor no matter *which* way they went…

Meanwhile, Wei Wuxian was shaking his head with a slightly crooked smile. “Purple was the color of the Jiang,” he explained. “It would feel… not right, to wear it now.”

Huh. Not sure what that meant, beyond something *complicated*. Because as noted, purple was *not* cheap, and if that was a color for a group that apparently Wei Wuxian thought he couldn’t associate himself with anymore…

Then again, true black and red were *also* historically very expensive colors, and Nie Huaisang had read that intriguing write-up by the person who’d made those recreated robes; the outer layer may have been faded, but the robes underneath were very good quality.

Although, the man’s boots had definitely seen better days. They should probably do something about that. He’d have to ask Gao Huiqing to recommend a cobbler; Nie Huaisang

suspected that transitioning to modern shoes would be much trickier for Wei Wuxian than modern clothes.

Gao Huiqing, meanwhile, was going through the swatches that Wei Wuxian had flagged as ones he liked, taking notes and occasionally checking with Wei Wuxian about what aspects appealed the most – texture? Weight? Color?

As he began wrapping up his notes, however, the tailor hesitated, casting another, more contemplative look over the fabrics Wei Wuxian had picked out, and Nie Huaisang hid a grin, because he was fairly sure he could guess what the man was thinking.

He was right, of course. "You mentioned wards on clothing," Gao Huiqing said slowly. "Are there specific materials that you would require?"

"Good silk is best," Wei Wuxian agreed. "But… almost anything can work!" Then he hesitated, picking up a piece of what looked like polyester. "...Maybe not this," he admitted. "It might take some trying."

"Is that… something that you would do yourself?" Gao Huiqing asked, very casually. "Or is that something you would ask a specialist to do?"

Nie Huaisang mentally cackled. He *knew* he'd seen the man's ears twitch when they'd been discussing swords and wards. Which was exactly as he'd planned.

And from the sly grin on Wei Wuxian's face, he wasn't the only one who'd been waiting to see if the fishy would nibble the bait. "I do it myself sometimes, yes. But…" He held out a hand expectantly. "Wrist!"

Oh-*ho*. Now *this* was an unexpected development, Nie Huaisang noted to himself, watching with interest as Gao Huiqing held out his hand with the stunned look of a deer staring into oncoming headlights – or, more accurately, of an accomplished, practical-minded adult suddenly facing the possibility that a childhood fantasy might actually be *attainable*.

Taking the offered arm with one hand, Wei Wuxian pulled it closer so he could reach across the table with his other hand to hover over the pulse point of Gao Huiqing's wrist. After a few seconds – during which there was a *criminal* lack of glowing special effects, phooey! – he hummed and let go. "It would take much – a lot? – of work. But… one year, maybe two? You can learn."

Gao Huiqing's eyes were huge. "Learn… to cultivate?" he… yes, that was definitely a squeak.

"Ah." Smiling ruefully, Wei Wuxian tilted his hand back and forth. "To become a cultivator, nope. That would take much longer, to build the foundation. But you are… hm." He pursed his lips. "One who knows the skills that you use very well. *That* foundation is built. What is left is to clear the meridians to move qi *with* those skills."

Oddly enough, that seemed to settle the tailor somewhat. Gao Huiqing straightened and shook his shoulders out for a moment before he said, remarkably level, "I would be very

interested in learning that."

Wei Wuxian's grin had teeth. "And what is it that I get?"

Aaand that would be his cue. "Ah-ah!" Nie Huaisang chided, stepping between them and shaking his finger at both. "Negotiations are *my* job! And on that note…" A quick glance confirmed that yes, Lan Wangji had marked several pages in the references he'd been given, and he grinned. "I do believe we're done with you two for now! Go make Lan Wangji show you around the city for a while!" He waved a hand at the professor. "Go ahead and take the car; I have some other errands to run, so I'll take the bus back. Shoo, shoo!"

Lan Wangji huffed, but rose from his chair. When he glanced at Gao Huiqing, the man sighed, but waved Lan Wangji on.

Once the door closed behind the pair, Nie Huaisang *grinned*. "So! Shall we discuss what services you'll be interested in providing?" he asked brightly. And smirked inwardly, because if he couldn't get the price down to cost of materials after that, then he wasn't a Nie!

OMAKE:

NHS: "Hmmm, skin-tight gymnastics clothes or form-hugging jeans, which will melt more brains? …obviously the only correct answer is *both*!"

NOTES:

Wei Wuxian is definitely thinking about the fact that if you're going to recreate cultivation, you should probably recreate the support staff arts as well… (As is Nie Huaisang!)

The whole thing about a significant part of conversation being either nonverbal or based on your ability to fill in the bits you didn't quite hear? Speaking from experience, nothing drives that home so hard as trying to talk on the phone in your second language!

And yes, Nie Huaisang was *absolutely* aiming to melt Lan Wangji's brain with the athleisure comment. (And he's also punching the jealous territoriality buttons so that all he has to do is make noises about Wei Wuxian going in front of cameras alone, and Lan Wangji will cave to getting a fitting as well.)

I admit, one of the interesting parts of this chapter was that while the dislike of fashion that Lan Wangji expresses *feels* very consistent with his character, it's something that *only* works with a modern AU. Because for all that the Lan asceticism extends to their clothing (something that the adaptations and a lot of fandom tends to forget in favor of Pretty Costumes – and yes, I'm well aware that I have no right to throw stones on that front!),

clothing really is an intrinsic part of power and status. In fact, I suspect that the Lan clan's asceticism developed from its initial *asceticism* to become a kind of reverse snobbery…

As for the tailor… heh. My plot bunnies were cackling at the thought that Nie Huaisang would *absolutely* get a kick out of dressing Wei Wuxian up, and the next thing I knew, Gao Huiqing had pretty much written himself and demanded an appearance.

Besides. It was way too much fun writing the whole starry-eyed *must be cool and professional but* OMG OMG OMG reaction. Especially when, let's be real, that would be all of us…

Fun side note: the novel actually gives us next to nothing regarding Wei Wuxian's appearance. So far as I recall, all we get is his height (notes in the side stories), that he's wearing black when he resurfaces after the Burial Mounds and at the Flower Banquet, and that he's very good looking in both bodies (although apparently Mo Xuanyu is more on the "cute" side rather than classically handsome). That's pretty much it; even that signature red ribbon only comes up in the post-novel side stories! But while I'm using the donghua for appearances, logically Wei Wuxian *should* normally have worn Jiang colors. But this is post-Sunshot, post-Burial Mounds Wei Wuxian… and, well, a signature image is a signature image!

Although, speaking of? One of the things that always amuses me when fanworks linger on Lan Wangji's powerful muscles and how he is "built like a brick sh*thouse"… is that, canonically, he's *not*. We get an actual description of his physique in the tree-jump scene in chapter 87, where he's described as "slender" and looking like "quite the scholarly young master." It's quite explicit that he looks this way *despite* his actual strength.

For the curious – in this setting, Wei Wuxian absolutely has the edge on Lan Wangji in terms of both musculature and functional strength, because Lan Wangji is not a trained athlete and Wei Wuxian for all intents and purposes is. And given what he pulls off without a core, his original body must have been on par with Lan Wangji in canon!

(Also, yes. The high definition of muscles you tend to see on actors in action movies today? I've read that they achieve that effect in part by *not drinking anything before the shoot* as well as actual workouts. Dehydration is apparently supposed to be sexy…?)

Also, fun historic tidbit: according to Mark Lewis's *China Between Empires*, the discovery of gunpowder was the result of attempts to develop an artificial form of cinnabar. So given the setup of cultivation sects… yep, seems entirely possible that cultivators stumbled across that first!

60 kmh = about 37 mph. That appears to be a pretty standard side-road speed in China, based largely on a quick Wikipedia skim!

LovePsycho on Tumblr is the one who pointed out that, given what we know of their preferences regarding bitter flavors? Contrary to… probably every modern AU I've ever read, Wei Wuxian would *despise* coffee, while Lan Wangji would probably love it. Headcanon accepted!

(I freely admit that there's an element of projection as well; I hate the taste of coffee. I don't even like coffee flavored candy or chocolates with coffee-flavored crème filling. I don't even like the smell. Which makes it really irritating when people put hot water for tea in pots normally used for coffee, because the coffee taste gets *into* the water and *yetch*… ahem.)

And while I know a lot of people were gleefully looking forward to Wei Wuxian on social media… well. Bare minimum, he's going to need a *lot* more language practice and acculturation before the vast majority of *anything* would even make sense to him. (Think about, oh, various posts commenting on political parties. Now think about how much background information is backed into those!)

But on top of that… Honestly? I don't think a Wei Wuxian *from the sixth century* would find social media particularly appealing.

Among other things, it's a communication tool – but who would he even communicate with? Everyone he knows is *right there*. Maybe as an information-gathering tool… but bear in mind that what goes on in social media is, fundamentally, *gossip*. And Wei Wuxian knows gossip all too well.

As for posting anything himself? Wei Wuxian lived in a world where a moment's vulnerability in the wrong time or wrong place or wrong person could have devastating consequences. Where he had to calculate every word and action. Yes, he crossed lines – but only when he judged the consequences worth it. He is *guarded* about his thoughts and feelings… but he hides it with smiles and misdirection and deflection. Add in the invasive media storm he's going to be facing, and... yeah. I suspect he'd lean on the "I am from the ancient past, I know nothing about this interwebs thing!" just for a modicum of privacy!

(Well. Maybe if he had an absolutely awesome husband to gush about…)

Put simply… Wei Wuxian isn't a netizen. His relationship to the internet and social media is going to look *very different* than that of someone who grew grow up with the internet just *being there*. He's looking at it from the outside. And, personally? I think he'd find the technology fascinating… but I don't think he'd be all that impressed by the *content*. (Especially once he finds out about the level of censorship involved in Chinese social media!)

(And I freely admit that this interpretation is influenced by my own choice to stay away from social media, just as someone who enjoys and is embedded in it would probably have the opposite interpretation! Red of Overly Sarcastic Productions actually has an awesome analysis on how modern technology and its mentality gets projected backwards in fantasy and science fiction…)

Chapter 14: Exploration

Chapter Summary

> Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian go shopping and geek out. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Well, that was interesting!

Wei Wuxian was still chuckling to himself when Lan Wangji opened the door to reveal that they'd finally returned to the ground level. Lan Wangji had retreated from Guo Huiqing's office with all the haste of a startled cat!

For his own part, Wei Wuxian was a little disappointed that they hadn't stayed; he would have liked to watch and see how haggling worked in this new age, especially since Wen Yuan had mentioned that it wasn't as common anymore outside of certain contexts. On the other hand, it was plainly obvious that *he* was one of the bargaining chips. Which was…

Well. It struck a little closer to home than he liked. He was well aware that no few of the offers of aid extended to Lotus Pier had been made with an eye to getting access to the creator of the ghost path. Which had done nothing to soothe Jiang Cheng's bristling bitterness after the war. So while he would have liked to stay and watch Nie Huaisang at work… Lan Wangji wasn't the only one just as glad to escape.

Besides – exploring!

"Lan Zhan!" he said brightly, and grinned when the man glowered at him. Really, he knew he probably shouldn't use the name – it was more than obvious that Lan Wangji had *not* appreciated his brother sharing that tidbit. But how could he *not* be charmed by the image of a chubby-cheeked little Lan Wangji earnestly declaring himself to be Lan *Zhan*? It was too cute for words!

Besides. That reflexive glower meant that it was a very effective way to get the man's attention.

"Where will we go next?" he asked, glancing around as they left the stairwell. Ah, they were back in the richly appointed antechamber again; there were the doors leading to the "elevator" over there, and the – guard? manservant? clerk? – at his desk, and the glass-paned doors to the outside. It made for a striking contrast to the bare, utilitarian stairs that they'd taken down in lieu of riding the elevator again. Clearly the stairs were meant for servants, or at the very least *not* public eyes.

Granted, it was possible that they just hadn't seen the point in decorating the stairs when more convenient options were available. That had been a *very* long climb down.

Lan Wangji hesitated. "You are the guest," he said. "This trip is for you."

Wei Wuxian huffed in amusement, linking his hands behind his back as they moved toward the exit. "Yes, and that means that everything is new to me," he said practically. "So anywhere is interesting! But don't you have places you would like to go?"

After all, Lan Wangji had not left Cloud Recesses since Wei Wuxian had woken out of the ice. Which wouldn't have been a surprise for someone living in the self-contained and intentionally inaccessible seat of the Gusu Lan clan that he had known, but the school it had become was not nearly so detached from the surrounding community.

"There… is an errand I thought I might do," Lan Wangji said after a moment. "It would take us to the historic district."

Wei Wuxian hummed, considering that. He'd assumed that their excursion today would focus on the "modern" part of the city, and that poking around the older districts would have to wait for another time. Then again, it was hard to imagine anything more strikingly *not* of his time than the spires of glass and steel towering in every direction! And if Lan Wangji had business in the old city *anyway*...

Grinning, he clapped his hands and bounced a little on his toes. "Then that is decided!" he said brightly. "You lead, I will follow."

Lan Wangji glanced at him, pausing just before stepping out into the rushing stream of people outside. "Given the distance… it would be best to take the car."

Ah. Wei Wuxian smiled sheepishly; apparently he hadn't been quite as subtle as he'd hoped about how twitchy the cramped space had made him.

Then again, Lan Wangji didn't seem any more pleased by the thought than he was, and the man had taken them straight to the stairs after they'd left Gao Huiqing's workspace (and that was a strange thought, a whole business occupying a single set of rooms out of many in one building!) without a word from Wei Wuxian. So it was entirely possible that he was not alone in his dislike of sitting in small metal boxes.

Although… by the time they made it back to the building that seemed to serve as a stable for vehicles, Wei Wuxian had to admit that getting off the street was… something of a relief. The crowds were one thing; there might be *more* people crammed into a limited space than even Lotus Pier had seen outside of festivals, but that was more a difference of degree than of kind. But between the rumbling of the cars, the flashing lights everywhere, and the incessant *beeping* in a myriad of forms…

He stood by his first impression: these people were *far too fond* of blinking lights and beeping noises.

It helped that when they reached the car, Lan Wangji directed him to the seat in the front, and demonstrated how to adjust the position of the seat to better accommodate his long legs. Riding in a metal box was bad enough without trying to fold himself into a space that had clearly been designed for a smaller frame.

Still. It was… odd. He was no stranger to cities! He usually *liked* them, with the hustle and bustle of so many people going about their varied lives. But then again, he was also used to being able to stroll out to hunt pheasants or nap in a tree, rather than the seemingly endless arrays of tall buildings that made even the sky feel hemmed in and claustrophobic. No wonder city folk apparently chose to live up in the heights, no matter how long a climb!

Although, now that he thought about it…

"Lan Zhan," he said, leaning forward slightly to look up at those towering edifices of glass and steel and the material that apparently was called *concrete*. "How many people live in Caiyi?" Because if he considered that many people lived in those towers, and set that in his mind's eye against the sprawling spread of the city seen from a distance…

"Roughly one million, as of the last census," Lan Wangji said.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian's mind simply went blank. One *million*? That was *twice* the population of Luoyang in the days when the Han capital had been at the height of its influence! And Nie Huaisang had said something about Caiyi being a relatively *small* city…

"Agriculture has improved greatly," Lan Wangji said, guiding the car around a turn onto a new road. One that apparently was taking them away from the merchant district; there were fewer of those impossibly colored lighted signs, fewer cars and people… and, Wei Wuxian noted, the height and *glossiness* of the surrounding buildings was gradually easing. "New technologies, new crops, improved trade between regions… famine is far rarer today. Between better food and better medicine… people live much longer than they once did, and more children survive childhood."

All of which was an amazing accomplishment, and wonderful in the abstract, but… "I see why you prefer to stay up on the mountain!" he said ruefully. How did people get anything *done*, living on top of each other?

Although… he'd *missed* the bustle, as well. Even after the war, the merchants and traders had been slow to return to Lotus Pier, many of them still recovering themselves from the damage done to their trade networks and wary of Jiang Cheng's new and untried leadership. The same for disciples; their numbers had swelled during and after the war, but it would be… *would have been* a long time before they had boisterous younger disciples scampering about again. And Yiling had only just managed to make themselves genuinely stable; there hadn't been time or opportunity to develop the sort of trade goods that might lure merchants to them, particularly when that might invite the disapproval of the victorious clans.

He'd been contemplating offering them his compass, if he could just solve the problem of making it useful for common people. They had the craftspeople with the necessary skills to make it, and it would be practical close to the Burial Mounds anyway. Jiang Cheng had never been interested in the project, so he probably wouldn't have particularly cared anyway…

Well. That hadn't happened, for obvious reasons.

I wonder what happened to them.

An odd thought, in a way. Certainly he'd never had any love for the Wen, especially after the fall of Lotus Pier. But… the people who had been exiled to remote and desolate places like Yiling… they weren't Wen Chao or Wen Ruohan. They'd been branch family members, outer disciples, juniors, elders, servants, artisans… Most of them had been given no more choice in the war than he had.

A'Fang always talked about someday traveling beyond Yiling. I wonder if he ever got the chance?

Something to look into! But later – apparently they'd reached their destination, because Lan Wangji had turned into another one of those odd stables for cars and stopped.

Recalling what had happened the last time, Wei Wuxian was careful to keep his breathing shallow until they managed to get out into the open air again. Even so, he had to exhale hard a few times to chase the reek of rock oil and biting steel and acrid smoke out of his nostrils.

Immediately he noticed a difference. The taste of strange smoke still lingered in the air, but now it was countered by the scent of running water and green things growing. Some of which seemed to be from gardens; looking around, he immediately noticed that the buildings in this area were a *much* more reasonable two and three stories, and he could make out greenery poking out over walls and around the odd corner.

Buildings of a far more familiar shape and style, he noted with interest. Oh, there were certainly odd elements here and there, but overall the entire setting felt *familiar* in much the same way as Lan Wangji's Jingshi, or the area that corresponded to the old Cloud Recesses complex. So it was not a great surprise when Lan Wangji followed a narrower road leading away from the main street and its vehicles, onto a footpath running along a canal.

"This is the older part of the city, then?" he asked, looking around with interest. Oddly, although he saw several boats drift along the canal, none of them were the larger boats meant to move goods to and from the markets, nor were any of them moving much faster than the leisurely pace of the current. In fact, other than a few brightly colored boats that reminded him of floating merchant boats during festivals, most of them seemed like casual pleasure boats, meant to be ridden mostly for the luxury of letting the water carry you.

Then again, why not? It was much quieter here, but he could still hear the rumbling and beeping of the cars on the main streets nearby. Given how fast they were, and the sheer size of some of them… presumably if you actually had somewhere to be or goods to move, you would take one of those, or perhaps one of those odd two-wheeled devices that had been ducking through the crowded cars earlier. Which would leave the canals to those who wanted to drift leisurely away from the hustle, and shops catering to their desires.

"Mn." Lan Wangji was walking along the walkway, pace steady and measured. "When it was rebuilt following the Cultural Revolution, the city decided to recreate its historic appearance as closely as possible, rather than modernizing."

Following behind him, Wei Wuxian raised a mental eyebrow. Cultural Revolution? He'd caught a few brief references in passing to that before, but not much in the way of details. But from the way Lan Wangji spoke about it… it was relatively recent, although not too much so.

Fifty years recent, perhaps?

After all, he hadn't forgotten those fire-ghosts. And if they'd had to *rebuild* the district…

Although it was interesting that Lan Wangji said that *the city* had made the decision to recreate the old appearance. For Cloud Recesses, that made sense – it was obvious that the Lan love of tradition was alive and well! But the *town* didn't seem so attached to the past… and he couldn't help but notice that while many of the people walking along the footpaths – nothing like the crowds before, but still a respectable number – moved like Lan Wangji, with the confidence of familiarity, many more were obviously visitors. He even saw a group of young women on the far side of the canal with hair that ranged from deep brown to pale gold, pointing at everything and exclaiming loudly to each other in an unfamiliar language.

He was so busy watching all the people that he almost missed it when Lan Wangji turned into one of the stores that opened onto the walkway. Catching himself, he turned as well, following the man into…

Ah, an instrument maker's store! Or… perhaps not a *maker*, there was a wide enough variety that it was possible that the storefront represented the work of multiple crafters. Still, it was familiar enough to what he remembered from his own era that he found himself smiling fondly as he looked about.

Lan Wangji had gone straight to the man standing at the counter in the back – from the sound of it, he was getting new strings for his guqin. Since he seemed occupied for the moment, Wei Wuxian set about exploring the contents.

Although he kept his hands tucked behind his back, because there was an interesting variety to be seen, and he didn't want to be conspicuously ignorant about anything he *should* know about.

Granted, most of the contents were familiar enough. He suspected, especially given Lan Wangji's comments about this being the historic district and the sightseers he'd noticed outside, that this shop intentionally emphasized the more traditional instruments, catering to the overall aesthetic of the area. So he was not at all surprised by the guqin and guzheng, the displays of dizi and xiao…

Although he did have to cackle at the rack holding a beautifully carved pipa, because he vividly remembered old Jiang Yuze inveighing against the fad for the newfangled "barbarian" instrument from the north!

Which just proves that it doesn't matter what a tradition might be, at some point all *traditions were brand new inventions!*

Chuckling to himself, Wei Wuxian wandered over to the case with dizi on display. Clearly the shape and structure of the instrument hadn't really changed much over the centuries, but it

was impressive to see the range of *materials* used now: plenty of bamboo ones, of course, but also metal, jade, even a few made of glass, as well as several of the glossy "plastic" in bright colors that looked by the size to be intended for children.

I wonder what that would sound like? Although if they *were* meant to be used by rambunctious and often careless children, they'd likely been designed for durability more than tone!

Plus… well, he'd received several very fine dizi made of jade and other materials as gifts over the years, but there was a reason why he still favored Chenqing. Sentiment and familiarity aside, the seasoned bamboo simply sounded better!

Not to mention that most of those gifts had come with strings that had nothing to do with music, and that was a complication he definitely hadn't needed.

Shaking his head in amusement, he turned away from the case holding the fancier dizi – and he *still* found that mind-boggling, that people in this new era could make such huge panes of flawless glass cheaply enough that a simple shop like this would have *several* cases just for display! Glancing around the shop again, he noticed a section that had apparently been set aside for documents of some kind. Intrigued, he glanced back to the desk – yes, Lan Wangji was apparently still speaking to the proprietor, he still had some time to browse – he wandered over. And…

Ah! Music – *written* music! …or at least, that was what he assumed it was? One section had pieces written in what was recognizably the Gongche system, even if it seemed to have been altered slightly over the centuries. But there were also whole shelves of books featuring numbers and dashes, or a strange structure of five lines festooned with dots and symbols that he *knew* had to be music in some form, because he'd seen Lan Wangji looking at similar texts when experimenting with his guqin.

"Are you interested in anything in particular?"

Wei Wuxian looked up from the book he'd been flipping through – not that he could actually make heads or tails of the odd symbols, but the brightly colored picture on the cover had caught his eye, especially because he *really* wanted to know why someone had drawn a bunch of *cats* playing instruments – and grinned at Lan Wangji. "All of it!"

That scored him a flat stare, and he laughed. Honestly, *all* was probably an overstatement. But he was *curious*! Wen Yuan's "earbuds" were not that soundproof, after all, so he'd had plenty of opportunity to catch bits and snatches of the music of this time, and it ranged from familiar to mind-bogglingly bizarre – and he'd heard some very odd music in his time.

Plus, he was pretty sure he'd spotted another book of music with a cover that looked a lot like the illustrations in Wen Yuan's xianxia novel, and he was *really* curious to hear what the people of this time believed musical cultivation should sound like.

Which. Catching Lan Wangji's eye, he lifted the book he was holding slightly, drawing attention to those odd lines and dots, and raised his eyebrows.

Lan Wangji glanced at the proprietor of the store for a moment. “That is a musical notation system from Europe,” he said, apparently satisfied that the man was sufficiently occupied to not be eavesdropping – although he did lower his voice. “It is designed so that any musician can repeat the exact pitch and length of a note precisely.”

Wei Wuxian *blinked*. And then grinned fiercely, latching on to Lan Wangji’s arm. “You are going to show me how to read it, yes?” he demanded.

Lan Wangji gave him a look that was too deadpan to be anything but amused. “You are perfectly capable of mastering songs by ear. After hearing them *once*.”

Wei Wuxian huffed, waving an impatient hand. Yes, he could, and it had given the stodgy old Lans a conniption when it finally sank in that there wasn’t much point in secret songs when anyone with an ear could hear them – although he thought Lan Yi would approve of the fact that it meant he had the knowledge available to pass on to her descendant. But. “That is not the point!” he insisted. “You can *write music*!”

And that had *possibilities*. After all… talismans drew their power from the transformation of words and language into written symbols. So if you could also write *music*…

Setting *that* intriguing possibility aside for later exploration, Wei Wuxian grinned at Lan Wangji. “Is your errand done, then? Where do we go next?”

Lan Wangji considered him. “Would you be interested in a light meal?”

Ooo.

He actually wasn’t particularly hungry, to be honest. After several years of living on the barest basic rations he could trade for in Yiling, supplemented by what game and forage he could scrounge out of the Burial Mounds – not exactly an abundance, but enough to get by – and using inedia as required to stretch his supplies, he was still getting used to the sheer *abundance* of food available in this time. Not to mention that even foods that Lan Wangji considered very basic were more varied, flavorful and *rich* than some of the foods that the Jiang had served at festivals and feasts!

But when they’d discussed their plans last evening, Wen Yuan had been insistent that they try the restaurants in Caiyi. And after seeing what Lan Wangji considered *basic*? He definitely wanted to see what was considered special!

Lan Wangji didn’t smile, but Wei Wuxian did get a sense of indulgent amusement as the man led the way out of the store and out onto the walkway along the canal again.

Wei Wuxian watched the storefronts with interest now, gauging them against his memories of Caiyi’s canals and his growing understanding of what Lan Wangji meant when he called this a *historic* district. Some of it, he could guess: the buildings were all of a particular *look*, distinct from the “modern” area of the tailor’s workplace. This felt far more like the market district of a wealthy city, with shops open along the ground level to display their wares to passersby. But oddly, there were *only* shops and storefronts, all of which seemed to be

established businesses run by local residents; he didn't see any peddler's stalls or itinerant merchants hawking their goods.

"There are areas set aside for open markets, but temporary stalls are prohibited in this area," Lan Wangji said, when Wei Wuxian commented on it.

Well. That wasn't so different, he supposed. It would have the benefit of making it easier to find things, and from the perspective of the town it would be far easier to keep an eye on business and crack down on any trouble before it got started… and, presumably to ensure that those in power got their cut. Although he had to imagine that the competition for space and customers would be fierce; no setting up on a quieter corner near an established shop to take advantage of the flow of regular clientele.

Not to mention… "Prohibited?" he asked curiously.

Lan Wangji nodded. "They were considered… problematic. This area is popular with tourists – people who travel to distant places to experience things that are new or famous. Tourists are often inclined to spend money, but they frequently expect a specific experience, so areas that cater to them tend to be more… curated."

Interesting. He'd gotten the vague impression that the peripatetic lifestyle of the wandering peddler or rogue cultivator was… less sustainable in this new age, despite the relative ease and speed of travel. Apparently, it was not entirely so – although it did seem rather reversed, with traveling customers coming to local merchants, rather than the other way around!

Was that a side effect of travel being so much faster? Or maybe the trade networks had changed enough that there was less need for smaller merchants to fill the gaps?

Meanwhile, they'd apparently reached their next destination; Lan Wangji had opened the door to another shop and was patiently holding it open for him. Which was interesting – they'd passed several small restaurants already, but they'd all been open to the walkway, with roofs to keep the sun off and sliding doors for when the shop closed. In fact, other than the instrument store they'd visited earlier, fully enclosed shops were more the exception than the norm…

Stepping into the store, Wei Wuxian froze. Based on Lan Wangji's earlier question, he had assumed that they were headed for a food vendor of some kind. Instead…

Books!

Rows upon rows of shelves absolutely *filled* with books, books and *more* books, and a staircase on one side which implied that there were *even more* on the next level, and…

Vaguely, Wei Wuxian noted the door swinging closed behind him. Not that he was paying attention. Distractedly, he raised a finger. "Your pardon," he told Lan Wangji absently, not actually looking at the man. Or blinking.

And then proceeded to dive in and lose himself in *all the books*.

Well. Not *completely* lose himself; thankfully, between the history books and the novel and the ongoing translation games he and Wen Yuan were playing with the poetry book, he was familiar enough with the new modified characters – and had enough vocabulary – to quickly figure out some of the basics of the organization system, and he knew enough to puzzle out more from context and guesswork. But it wasn't enough to browse, not when he was still relying on educated guesses half the time, which was almost physically painful. Still. Just skimming was fascinating – if only to see *how much* there was, and what it was about.

He passed the section dedicated to histories by. Not without regret, but… well. He knew enough to realize how much he *didn't* know. And he trusted Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan's choices regarding what he *needed* to know on that subject for now. Later, perhaps, he might want to dig deeper into the specifics… but that was a problem for later!

He did find it interesting that the texts dealing with questions about the how and *why* of the way the world worked seemed to have been fractured into many different areas that were apparently considered wholly distinct from each other. That was…

Well, on the one hand, he could absolutely understand the impulse. How many treatises on cultivation had he read, only to throw up his hands in disgust because they'd been written by people with theories in search of evidence to justify them, rather than the facts in search of theories to explain them? How many people had lectured him at length about how using resentful energy ran against the will of heaven and blithely ignored the fact that resentful energy was *part* of the world under heaven? But by that same token, he knew very well that what you *expected* to find shaped your perception of what was happening in front of you. Pretending that they were separate entities seemed… disingenuous. If he had a wuzhu for every idiot blathering about *modao* when the demonic had *absolutely nothing to do with it*...

Huh. It looked like anything to do with demons and gods had also been siphoned off into their own category. Odd. And then a whole separate category for yao… Right. People didn't think those existed anymore. Which remained less weird than *disturbing*. Either the inherent nature of the universe had changed for some reason, or there was something very *wrong*. And the inherent nature of the universe tended not to change much!

It *was* nice that they had the technical manuals set aside, from a practical standpoint… Ooh, there was an entire *section* set aside just for books about programming! Unfortunately, they were also well past his current reading level. Oh well. He'd just have to pester Wen Yuan about that textbook of his some more!

The section on medicine and healing was a little better; between Wen Yuan and Wen Qing, he'd picked up a fairly thorough grounding in what was apparently "Western" medical lore and practice. Although he did find it interesting that he also recognized many references from the work that he and Lan Wangji had been doing on translating cultivation terms to the language of this time. Apparently the *lore* of cultivation had continued to linger in medical theory, which made a kind of sense…

Although. Um. Yikes. He *really* hoped that some of it *hadn't*, there were definitely aspects of cultivation that weren't exactly safe for the untrained person.

And that wasn't even getting into the gloriously *dizzying* variety of fiction and poetry and…

Standing back for a moment to catch his breath, a startling thought occurred to him. Given the number of shelves, and the number of books *on* those shelves, and the sheer *amount* of text that could be crammed into those books thanks to the new printing technologies…

This little store – and there was not a doubt in his mind that this was *small* as such stores went, after seeing the other area of the city – had more *knowledge* inside its walls than had been stored in the *entire library* of the Gusu Lan, even before the war!

It did make him wonder. One of the advantages of a junzi's education was that everyone of a certain level had a shared base of knowledge to reference. But he'd seen at least *three* different annotations of the *Shi Jing* on those shelves. What did people do, when they didn't even share the same basis for wordplay?

Turning to ask Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian belatedly realized that he had been following him the whole time, amber eyes warm and amused in an otherwise expressionless face. Huffing, Wei Wuxian wrinkled his nose at the man and didn't bother to even try to apologize, because frankly if Lan Wangji had brought him to a place like this and *not* expected him to get thoroughly distracted, then he had not been paying attention over the past month and there was simply no hope for the man.

Although now he was curious. "You mentioned food?" he prompted. Because while books were glorious, he was fairly certain they were not exactly edible!

Nodding, Lan Wangji turned and began to make his way towards the back of the store. Intrigued, Wei Wuxian followed, until they rounded a line of shelves and he found himself stopping and staring yet again, because there was a restaurant *inside* the bookstore. That was…

Actually, he had to wrestle with himself for a moment, because on the one hand, being able to sit down with tea and a meal and a new book? That was *brilliant*, why hadn't anyone done that before?

Except he *knew* why, because books were fragile and expensive, even assuming you even *could* lay hands on the one you wanted, and only a fool would endanger one by casually eating while you read it, and yes he *did* understand that things were very different in this time but *still*!

A light touch on his elbow made him blink, drawn out of his thoughts as much by the fact that Lan Wangji had actually initiated contact for once as by the touch itself. "I will order," Lan Wangji said, nodding to the counter running along one side of the area set aside for tables. Several people were already there, one talking to someone on the other side, several apparently waiting, and a young couple looking at a display on the wall behind the counter featuring both written descriptions and pictures, presumably of the food on offer. Information *and* temptation in one move – sneaky!

Although he wasn't sure what to make of the semi-opaque drinks of various colors with unidentifiable dark globs at the bottom that he saw on more than a few tables as he scanned the room for an open table. Although people did appear to be drinking from them with evident enjoyment? Still, most of the other things he saw were at least identifiable in context

if not specifics; this seemed to be primarily a tea shop – or at least a *drinks* shop – that also served small snacks to accompany the drinks. Which probably explained why Lan Wangji had asked about a *light* meal.

By the time Lan Wangji rejoined him, Wei Wuxian had claimed a small table with seating for two close to the wall that offered a clear view of both the dining area, the book store, and the windows looking out at the street on the other side of the building from the canal – which was an interesting detail that probably explained why the store didn't really follow the *aesthetic* of the historic district in its interior, if it catered to that street as well. Which also made the location perfect for people-watching *and* an effective way of catching any would-be eavesdroppers!

Although avoiding attention was definitely a lost cause from the moment they'd walked in, he admitted wryly. They were both noticeably taller than average, and Lan Wangji was… well, *Lan Wangji*, how could anyone *not* notice the man? Small wonder so many eyes were on them as Lan Wangji set down a tray and took the other seat.

Looking at the contents of the tray, Wei Wuxian made a face at the black liquid in one ceramic mug and pointedly moved it over to Lan Wangji's side of the table. He had tried coffee *once*, and so far as he cared that had been more than enough. The mug of tea, he claimed for himself, as Lan Wangji similarly distributed the two shallow bowls on the tray.

Wei Wuxian eyed the contents curiously. Both were semi-spherical lumps of… something, but that was about it for what he could identify. The one in front of him was a vivid pink, while the one in front of Lan Wangji was…

Huh. He sincerely hoped that it wasn't actually what his first baffled impression came up with, because while he recognized that regional cuisines could get extremely odd – especially when the gentry started getting competitive – some things *really* did not belong on a plate.

Still, Lan Wangji had picked up the long-handled, delicate spoon that came with the dish and dug a portion of the brown lump out – huh, so it was all one semi-solid mass – and eaten it without hesitation, so… With a mental shrug, Wei Wuxian scooped up some of his own pink stuff and popped it in his mouth.

Cold!

Followed by a burst of sweet tartness with an intense fruity flavor that he didn't recognize but *very* much liked. Humming appreciatively, he poked at the pink substance with his spoon, noting scraps of red that were probably from the original fruit, as well as tiny seeds here and there. Interesting that they'd left those in; perhaps they were considered part of the experience. "What *is* this?" he asked, scooping up another spoonful and studying it for a moment. Ah, it was *frozen* – he could see the sheen where the outer surface was beginning to melt, and the beginnings of a red puddle forming around the bottom of the semisphere in the bowl.

"Sorbet," Lan Wangji explained, setting his spoon down to speak. "Fruit juice frozen while churned to keep it soft. The flavor is strawberry."

Wei Wuxian popped his own spoon into his mouth, letting it melt over his tongue so he could appreciate the flavor. “Strawberry?” he echoed curiously, slightly muffled by speaking around the spoon.

“A fruit. You would not be familiar with it; it is actually a hybrid and was only developed… slightly less than three hundred years ago.”

Ah! That did explain why he didn’t recognize the flavor. Interesting to think of *fruit* as something that could be created.

Speaking of… He eyed Lan Wangji’s brown sorbet. “And what is that?”

“Chocolate,” the man answered. “It is made from the seeds of a tree from the Americas; you would not be familiar with it, either.” He hesitated. “Would you like to try it?”

Americas…? Ah, right, the lands on the far side of the world. They hadn’t talked much about them yet, but Wen Yuan had shown him a modern image of the world on his computer, when explaining the technology used to make those incredible maps in his books.

Wei Wuxian looked pointedly at the mug next to Lan Wangji. “Is it anything like coffee?” he asked warily. Because he *was* curious, but!

“Chocolate can be bitter,” Lan Wangji allowed. “But many who dislike coffee are fond of it.” He scooped out a small portion with his spoon and gestured with it towards Wei Wuxian’s bowl in silent offering.

Wei Wuxian mentally shrugged, grinned mischievously, and easily caught Lan Wangji’s wrist with his hand to guide the proffered spoon straight into his mouth.

Huh! He closed his eyes to concentrate on the new flavor on his tongue. He could taste the hint of bitterness, yes, but it was mostly sweet and *rich*, with the bitterness being more a tingling side-note rather than overwhelming.

“Mmm. It is good!” he agreed, opening his eyes – and inwardly bit back a laugh at the rare stunned look on Lan Wangji’s face. Apparently stealing the food straight off someone else’s spoon was a bit brazen even by the relaxed standards of this time!

Chuckling, Wei Wuxian ate another bite of the strawberry, enjoying how the tartness cleared away the lingering taste of the chocolate. “Do you come here often?” he asked curiously.

Lan Wangji seemed to shake himself, as if he’d been lost in thought. “On occasion,” he said. “The bookstore specializes in rarer books, and occasionally hosts special events.” He tilted his head towards the door leading out onto the street. “And it opens onto both the canals and a park.”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head. “Park?” he asked curiously. Surely Lan Wangji wasn’t referring to the hunting grounds kept by high nobles – among other things, Wei Wuxian didn’t think there was enough *room* in Caiyi for anything like that.

Lan Wangji hesitated for a moment. “I believe it began as a private garden during the Ming dynasty,” he said, carefully precise. “The area was neglected for some time, but when the historic district was established, it was reclaimed as a public green space.”

Amused – that was a very *elegant* explanation, as he should have expected of Lan Wangji! – Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows and glanced out the window again. Ah – yes, he could see the branches of trees rising above the wall that ran along the far side of the street. Quite the contrast from all the concrete and glass of before… which was probably the point, in a city where there was no option of wandering out to the periphery when one wanted a break from all the people.

“Would you like to visit it, when we finish here?” Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian brightened. “Yes! That sounds interesting.”

Granted, the idea of a public garden wasn’t exactly *new* to him. But he was curious to see how gardening philosophy and aesthetics had changed over the centuries. Lan Wangji’s garden followed the same fundamental ideas that he’d known from his own time, albeit with some fascinating new touches like the little lights, but he already knew Lan Wangji had a soft spot for the ancient!

Taking another bite of his strawberry sorbet, Wei Wuxian eyed Lan Wangji’s chocolate and calculated whether that soft spot would extend to allowing sweets theft. “We can go after we finish. It would be a shame to waste such a nice treat!”

Lan Wangji did not smile, exactly, but there was something indulgently amused in the cast of his eyes as he deliberately pushed his dish to the center of the table, in easy reach for both of them. Wei Wuxian pouted internally – it would have been fun to spar with spoons over it! – but happily helped himself as the man explained, “That is another reason I favor this store. They make the sorbet from fruit, rather than relying on jams or artificial flavorings. And the coffee and chocolate are ethically sourced.”

Huh. That might explain the seeds. It had seemed like a strange oversight not to remove them from a dish that seemed very high quality, but if the standard was to use false fruit (and how did *that* work?), then including the seeds would be an odd kind of reversed proof of quality. A bit like the Gusu Lan in their plain mourning white amid the brightly colored and embroidered robes of other sects. Which then raised the question… “Ethically sourced?” *Ethical* he knew, from the conversations they’d had about how he’d come to be at Cloud Recesses and the sort of demands he might face when Lan Wangji had been preparing him to meet Lan Qiren, and his conversations with Wen Qing… but what did that have to do with food sources?

Lan Wangji ate several more bites slowly without answering; familiar by now with the man’s preference for thinking a question over before answering – and of not talking while eating – Wei Wuxian didn’t press him, simply continued nibbling as he looked at the people in the shop.

It was an interesting range of ages. Only one or two families with small children, he noted – actually, very few families in general. Two tables in the center of the dining area had been

pushed together to accommodate a large group of girls perhaps a little older than Wen Yuan, talking gleefully as much *over* as *with* each other – the noise of which had very nicely covered their own conversation from any awkward eavesdropping. There were a respectable number of elders as well, men and women alike, mostly ensconced with books and drinks with the ease of regulars, although several were looking at tablets or computers, and one spry woman with iron-grey hair and quick hands was… oh, that was knitting! Neat! There was even an elderly pair sharing a single bowl of the sorbet – although that one was *green*, he wasn't sure he had the nerve to ask – with the affection of a well-married pair who didn't mind that the world knew of it, which was simply charming.

In fact, he noted with amusement, pushing the strawberry sorbet to the center in silent offer as well, most of these little tables for two were occupied by couples! Except most of them were *much* younger than those two, and very obviously still courting rather than wedded.

Lan Wangji finished his most recent bite – strawberry, Wei Wuxian noted – and set the spoon down again. "The expansion of trade has led to what we call economies of scale," he said. "It is easier to make any one thing more affordable if one makes *many* such things at once. Unfortunately, this means that control over such goods has come increasingly into the hands of a small number of powerful… merchant houses, I think, is the best way to describe them."

Ah. He could see where this was going. "And with no other merchants looking to purchase, they can pay as much or as *little* as they want for materials."

"In many cases, they have direct control over the production of those materials, as well as the goods," Lan Wangji said bluntly. "It has led to substantial mistreatment of the people who actually produce them, particularly for materials produced in poorer countries."

Wei Wuxian smiled humorlessly. Some things really didn't change, it seemed. He was well familiar with how easy it was for people in a position of power to simply *decide* that the woes of those with less power did not warrant consideration… or to just conveniently forget such minor details. Especially when there was an advantage to be gained by it.

Dark thoughts, and neither here nor there for the moment! Darting his spoon forward, he stole the last of the chocolate. "So! *Ethically sourced* means you will not trade with the merchants who do not treat their people well?" he concluded. "As I would expect of Lan Zhan!"

Lan Wangji huffed, but Wei Wuxian thought the man seemed pleased. "It is in many ways a luxury of the wealthy to be able to do so," he said honestly. "Such systems have made food and clothing and small comforts available to many who could not afford the cost of goods made more equitably." He began stacking the bowls and mugs back onto the tray as he added, "But neither will the system improve unless there is support for a better way of doing things. I can afford to do so, and thus have a responsibility."

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully as they both stood up from the table. The luxury part, he understood viscerally; it was easy for those who were wealthy, powerful and *safe* to cast judgment upon the desperate and vulnerable – in war and trade alike, apparently. But that Lan Wangji saw himself as morally *required* to make the ethical choice *because* of his privileged

position… Well! Now *that* was an idea that would make certain people of his past acquaintance very unhappy indeed!

Lan Wangji took the dishes to a receptacle beside the counter, and then looked at Wei Wuxian and tilted his head towards the nearby door to the street. “The park?”

Wei Wuxian grinned broadly. “Yes!” After the morning’s adventures, some time surrounded by the qi of living, growing things was very appealing. And, as previously noted: he was curious!

Lan Wangji very graciously held the door open for him. “Afterwards, *is* there anywhere you would like to go? My errands are finished.”

Wei Wuxian considered that. He genuinely hadn’t had any particular plans, but given that they were in the area of the old city already… “Is it very far to go to the lake?”

Lan Wangji considered that as they followed the street away from the store and towards a gate in the wall that seemed to be the entrance to the “park.” “Not too far to walk,” he said at last, as they passed through the gate and into the shade of the trees – *quite* welcome after the concrete and glass, this new structure of cities seemed to hoard the summer heat. “Perhaps two kilometers… roughly four li.”

Wei Wuxian grinned. “Excellent!” he said brightly. “I have been thinking there is something I would like to see about there.”

And speaking of… He looked about as they walked, taking in the scenery. It was interesting; someone had clearly gone to a great deal of trouble to make the space look natural, even though the artificiality of it was obvious to anyone who had ever had to make their way through an actual woodland! The trees had been arranged in copses and groves, all conveniently located away from patches of summer-blooming flowers, but even a quick glance showed that each scatter of trees was all the same age, as if they’d somehow all set root at the same time – a blatant telltale of intentional planting.

In fact, nearly all the trees were about the same age, with some younger ones here and there, and not a single old grandfather tree to be seen. Which made sense, given what Lan Wangji had said about the origins of the park, but it did make the level of deliberate intervention rather obvious, even before the lack of undergrowth that such a young woodland *should* have.

And then there were the more blatant details, like the very picturesque stream running through a concrete-lined channel. Wei Wuxian was fairly certain that was not something that happened in the wild!

Still. Amusing as the blatant artifice was, it wasn’t a *bad* effect. It reminded him of the gardens built by scholars who’d become intentional recluses rather than joining on with whatever warlords had reached ascendancy most recently. Initially the idea of a wilderness seclusion had been rather more literal, but as the idea had caught on, more than a few gentry had styled their gardens to a kind of wilderness aesthetic. This had much the same feel, if in a more diffuse manner than, say, the Garden of the Golden Valley.

Not to mention the opposite purpose!, he thought, highly amused, as a young boy ran screeching past with his sister in hot pursuit, one nearly-undone pigtail flapping lopsided on her head suggesting the cause of her ire. He could see their young parents walking at a more sedate pace behind them, plainly inclined to let the two run their energy out – although the mother did visibly panic for a moment when she realized that there was someone else on the path, before Wei Wuxian grinned and waved it off, accompanied by an amused tilt of Lan Wangji's head. After all, what was childhood *for*, if not to indulge in the chaos that adults were obligated to give up?

Although he did hope for their sake that the gardener didn't catch them, because that flower patch would never be the same again. Oops.

He chuckled, once he was sure that they were safely out of earshot. "They're lucky the Flower Maiden isn't here. She would not be pleased!"

Lan Wangji looked at him, silently inquiring.

"There was a town I visited once," Wei Wuxian explained. "They had a very nice flower garden; the Flower Maiden was a spirit that lived in it." He grinned at the memory. "There was a tradition. Young men would stand in the garden and speak poems! Because if a poem was beautiful enough, she would show her face to them." He smirked. "I spoke *bad* poems."

Lan Wangji gave him a *look*.

Wei Wuxian laughed. "And I spoke and spoke and spoke until she manifested just to yell at me! So it worked!" He tapped his cheek. "Although people said she was so mad that she did not manifest again for a year."

That was what they *said*. Personally, Wei Wuxian had gotten the impression that she'd been as amused by the prank as she was annoyed. People didn't usually play games with her challenge, after all!

Granted, if anyone had tried to *imitate* his stunt, she would probably have become extremely *un*amused, and very quickly. Novelty wore off quickly!

Lan Wangji huffed, shaking his head. Wei Wuxian chuckled, bumping the man with his shoulder. "*You* probably would not have needed poetry at all!" he told the man cheerfully. "But we simple normal people are different!" He grinned. "We should go there sometime. Perhaps she is still there!"

To his surprise, Lan Wangji simply… stopped short at those words, right in the middle of the path. At a glance, the man's expression seemed as composed as ever… except that his gaze was fixed on nothing at all.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian said, puzzled. That was not exactly the reaction he'd expected!

"…Do you truly believe she might still be there?" Lan Wangji asked. "Surely after a thousand years her spirit would have passed on."

Ah! That was right, Lan Wangji probably wouldn't know the difference just from the behavior alone. He would have to watch that. Wei Wuxian was accustomed to all but the youngest junior disciples and even most common folk understanding that there was more to spirits than ghosts, but that wasn't necessarily the case here, was it?

"The Flower Maiden was not a ghost!" he chuckled, as Lan Wangji began to walk again. "She was… a flower spirit of some kind, I think. She had cultivated, and became like a human." He frowned slightly, looking at the park with its young trees. "But if something happened to her garden… She might be gone."

He hoped not. It would be such a *waste* for her to have achieved so much, only to be destroyed by some chance fire or drought – or a careless army or would-be gardener. Although he assumed that she at least had the means to make her displeasure known to the latter, at least!

Lan Wangji didn't say anything to that, although Wei Wuxian had the impression that the man was thinking deeply. Which, well! He *had* said that the people of this time were under the impression that spirits of any kind were fiction! It did make sense that it might take some time to process the idea that such beings were real. And he knew from experience that the ones who felt they knew the most, struggled the hardest to accept that what they *knew* might not actually be as true as it had seemed.

So he let the man think and simply enjoyed the stroll. They'd come around to what he assumed was the far side of the park; he could see the wall beyond a line of trees, and beyond them he could hear the noise of the city: beeping, the rumble of vehicles, and…

Huh. That *whirrrrr* sound was familiar.

Eyes widening with glee, Wei Wuxian spun around to look at his companion. "Lan Zhan! Do you hear that?" he asked eagerly.

Lan Wangji's lips tightened slightly. "There is a small skate park nearby," he said stiffly. "It is… a space to practice using the boards." The man paused, probably taking in Wei Wuxian's grin, and actually sighed before turning at the next crossing onto a new path, one that appeared to lead towards the wall and presumably the park's exit.

Wei Wuxian followed, doing his best not to laugh at the man's reluctance. Like an elder pressed into service to corral rambunctious youngsters unleashed on the market!

Granted, considering that the fellow earlier *had* very nearly bowled both of them over – and Wei Wuxian might not have caught the exact words shouted at them but by tone alone it had definitely *not* been an apology! – he did get the feeling that these *skateboards* were not exactly the sort of thing associated with decorum and dignity.

The "skate park," when they arrived, was interesting. Very recognizably a training ground, not a garden (did that mean that a "park" was simply a public space for communal use?). The ground was level and open, paved with a surface similar to the roads. But not entirely featureless, either. While the center was open, the edges had a variety of odd features – a rail low to the ground, several platforms and ramps. Which looked odd in comparison to the

towering buildings of the main city dominating the sky on one side and the aesthetic of the historic district nearby, but it made a kind of sense. A space like this was anything but *historic*, and yet it wouldn't fit in the area of high buildings, so of course it ended up in the no-man's land between the two.

And what the people *using* it were doing…

Wei Wuxian *grinned*. Because the fellow from earlier had certainly seemed skilled enough in his balance and maneuvering – hence why Wei Wuxian's mind had jumped to sword flight! But he'd clearly been using the tool as a means of transport, not an end in itself.

These people were doing *tricks*!

The park was in a slightly sunken area, with a low wall surrounding it; sensible, given the nearby roads and the fact that one of the boards had just gone skidding at high speeds to crash into said wall when its rider attempted something a little too ambitious and parted ways with his board in a spectacular tumble.

Spectacular, but *controlled*, Wei Wuxian noted with approval as he dropped down to sit on the wall and watch. Someone had made sure these fellows knew the proper way to fall. And, he noted, the boy's companions checked that he was unhurt *first*, before launching into the requisite mockery of the failed attempt. A good bunch.

All male, he noted; it stood out, when elsewhere there seemed to be no limits on the sexes mingling. Then again, he doubted the bombast that flew around when young men gathered for anything had changed much. He couldn't blame the girls if they'd chosen to leave young male idiocy to young male idiots!

As he watched, the group dispersed once their friend was back on his feet, returning to their own training. It was interesting to watch and compare what they were doing to sword flight. Obviously there were definite differences; among other things, the skateboards were far broader than any sword blade, allowing easier balance and more space for adjusting one's footing. And there was no hilt to shift the center of balance backwards. Not to mention the obvious difference that the boards were ground-bound, and required the rider to gather physical momentum by kicking off the ground or rolling down a ramp first, rather than speed being controlled by qi.

But once they were in motion, the similarities in posture and technique were striking: the upright, centered basic position, the use of shifts in weight for precise movements, the coiled crouch for balance in preparation for a burst of speed or a sudden turn or a flip.

Not that many cultivators even attempted aerial acrobatics. Most of them didn't see the point of trying. *It's not like any of that will ever be* useful *for anything! Stop showing off, Wei Wuxian!*

Pfft. Wei Wuxian begged to differ. The ability to turn and dart and barrel roll unpredictably in the air had kept him from being pin-cushioned by arrows more than once during the war!

Besides. Just because no one had figured out how to fight in flight yet didn't mean it was *impossible*. And it would be useful. Bird yao were bothersome opponents regardless of their capabilities simply because they always controlled the field of battle and could easily retreat far from reach when they chose – and pursuit just turned the pursuers into easy prey in the air. And because qi-infused arrows were another thing that no one had figured out (yet), even a weak flying yao could terrorize a large area for *months* before it was finally tracked down in its nest.

Which was why he was watching the fellow who'd wiped out so spectacularly with intense interest as he once again tried to launch himself into the air, spin the board under his feet, and then settle onto it again *before* coming back to earth. Because that wasn't qi, that was *momentum*, and if a cultivator could break their qi flow and rely on momentum alone rather than going immediately into free fall… even if it wasn't enough to *fight*, freeing the hands and qi for just a few seconds would make saving a snatched victim much more possible.

Besides. That looked like *fun*! And contrary to what certain parties seemed to think, *fun* was not in any way antithetical to cultivation. If it demanded focus, balance, agility, confidence and skill… who cared if you enjoyed yourself along the way?

Speaking of, the young man he'd been watching had just finally successfully landed his trick, throwing his fists in the air with a cheer as he rode out the leftover momentum in an arcing curve around the park. Laughing, Wei Wuxian applauded enthusiastically.

From the fierce grin he got in response, the youth didn't mind having an audience at all. "Did you see that? Perfect three-sixty flip! Woo!"

Wei Wuxian grinned, remembering the glee of every disciple he'd ever taught after mastering a tricky technique. "I saw!" he agreed. "Good job on your balance."

The youth blinked, then leaned sharply to the side to bring his board around in a sharp turn, carrying him over to where Wei Wuxian was perched on the wall. By the time he actually reached it, his momentum had slowed enough that he simply stepped off the board, one toe catching the raised section at the end and flipping it up to where he could catch it with his hand – very neat!

The young man's eyes, meanwhile, were sharp and interested as he peered at Wei Wuxian. "You skateboard?" he asked. "I haven't seen you around here before."

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Nope! I just know how to watch people move. It looks fun, though!"

The youth blinked. "You from the country or something?"

Ah, right. He did have an accent, after all. "First time in the city," he admitted cheerfully, laughing internally. After all, it wasn't really a lie, given that the old Caiyi probably wouldn't even count as a city by the standards of this time!

The young man's lips pursed slightly as he gave Wei Wuxian an assessing look. "Want to try it?" he asked, nodding to the board in his hand.

Ah, now *that* was a familiar tone! Half wanting to share something he enjoyed, half wanting to show off just how much skill it *really* took.

Wei Wuxian turned to look up at Lan Wangji, who was standing behind him, *far* too dignified to sit on a wall with his feet dangling in the air. From the subtle tightness of the man's lips at Wei Wuxian's hopeful expression, he was anything but pleased by this turn of events – but he didn't actually say no, just gave a resigned tilt of his head.

Good enough! Grinning, Wei Wuxian hopped down from the wall to join the skateboarder.

"Okay. I'm Shen Jian, by the way," the young man said, and then continued without waiting for Wei Wuxian to introduce himself in turn, "So the first step is balancing…"

That part was easy; as Wei Wuxian had already observed, it wasn't particularly different from the basic stance in sword flight, although the skateboard wasn't quite as long as Suibian. It did take a minute to get used to the feel of it, though; a sword didn't vibrate in flight unless there were some very tricky winds involved, or gradually lose momentum on its own. After a fumble or two when the wrong reflexes kicked in, however, he settled into the differences, and then Shen Jian walked him through the techniques for turning, stopping, and then – when it was clear Wei Wuxian had a strong grasp of the basics – how to spin the board in a quick turn, and how to do a very simple jump.

After a few rounds and some time to experiment, Wei Wuxian felt confident in his understanding of the board and the way it moved on the ground and in the air. Idly kicking it up on one end to spin in place – a familiar trick from sword flight, but the added unpredictability of the wheels and the fact that he had to rely entirely on momentum rather than qi was an interesting challenge, and one that made the device even better as a potential training tool – he eyed a nearby ramp thoughtfully.

"Want to try?" Shen Jian asked. "Normally I'd say practice more first, but honestly you've got this on the landings, and that's the hard part. You can take it easy the first round—"

Wei Wuxian grinned. Backed up. *Launched*.

Midair, he tucked down, caught the board with a hand, and somersaulted.

Which… that part went fine; he had more than enough height and momentum to carry through the roll and straighten out for the landing…

Except that he reflexively slid his back foot back to anchor on the hilt that *wasn't there*. And slipped off the board entirely.

Oops. Right. Well then.

A second flip in the air to kill his forward momentum, and Wei Wuxian landed on his feet, catching the skateboard with a rueful laugh. "Aaah… that is a trick that may take more practice," he said ruefully.

Shen Jian stared at him – along with more than a few of the other youths scattered across the skate park.

Hm… That might have been a little too flashy. Although really, he'd only cheated with qi a *little* bit!

"…you've seriously never done this before?" Shen Jian blurted. "Are you an acrobat or something?"

Huh. Awkward; he didn't know that word and he didn't want to lie when he didn't even know what he was lying *about*, that was a good way to get caught, so… "Or something!" he said cheerfully. Really, that was such a wonderfully vague turn of phrase!

Shen Jian blinked – then, unexpectedly, his face brightened with sudden understanding. "*Ooh*," he said with a knowing nod. "Parkour guy, huh?"

Erm. That *also* was an unfamiliar term. Probably best to just smile and nod and hope that would be the end of it…

"Wei *Ying*."

Ah ha, excellent, an escape route! If a rather irate one, going by the way Lan Wangji had practically growled his name. Grinning, Wei Wuxian handed the board back to Shen Jian. "Thank you! That was fun. But I think I have worried my friend a bit too much today."

A quick wave goodbye – the new informality of this era was definitely convenient for making a quick escape without actually being *rude* – and he trotted back to where Lan Wangji was waiting.

Jumping up over the wall, he looked at Lan Wangji, and winced. The man's expression was, of course, perfectly composed, but he was definitely pale behind that flat stare, and he turned and stalked away with a determined stride.

Wei Wuxian followed ruefully. Apparently he'd given Lan Wangji a bigger scare than he'd realized. Which was fair, that last jump *had* been a bit scary; there were ways to mitigate a fall, but they required having enough height and momentum to control your landing. Back when he'd been experimenting with aerial stunts, he'd learned that the safest place to practice was actually up high – high enough to summon his sword back and remount before he got anywhere near the ground. Because below a certain point, a fall was a fall, and falling on concrete would definitely hurt!

Then again, in a way that was *why* he'd done it that way. He'd fallen plenty of times, after all. And he'd learned as a child that the scariest moment was exactly the moment you could least afford to flinch or you *would* fall.

Still. Lan Wangji was not a cultivator, likely wasn't used to stunts like that, and on a certain level he was responsible for Wei Wuxian, after all. No wonder he was upset!

Speeding up slightly to come up alongside Lan Wangji, he leaned forward to peer up into the man's face. "I'm sorry," he said. "I did not mean to make you worry."

For a moment, he thought Lan Wangji would just *ignore* him, although he did at least slow his pace a little. Then, unexpectedly, Lan Wangji said, "Your hair."

Wei Wuxian blinked. "Eh?" he said, reflexively reaching up.

Lan Wangji's fingers twitched, as if fighting the urge to reach out himself. "Your hair is coming loose," he clarified.

Feeling the way his bundled hair shifted back and forth, tugging oddly at the places it was still secure, Wei Wuxian made a face. He should have expected that, he supposed. There was only so much one could do to keep it in place when one spent one's time jumping and tumbling; there was a reason why he'd always favored a high tail, rather than a guan.

Not to mention that it rather neatly let him dodge Madam Yu's accusations of giving himself airs if he wore a guan of fine quality and of making Yunmeng Jiang look bad if he didn't. Not that she ever had a shortage of complaints no matter *what* he did, but that one had always been particularly ridiculous, since he distinctly recalled *both* complaints being aimed at the *same guan* at least once. On the same day, even.

So it wasn't surprising that the bun was coming loose again, especially since he hadn't exactly been all that careful putting it back up after their visit to Gao Huiqing. Huffing, Wei Wuxian quickly glanced around. Satisfied that – for the moment at least – the wall of the park was keeping them out of anyone's sight, he quickly shook his hair out and began finger-combing it back into order again.

Lan Wangji continued walking, although he slowed his pace further to allow for Wei Wuxian's distraction as he bundled his hair back up again. The man was still silent, but now that Wei Wuxian was paying closer attention, that heavy quiet seemed less angry and more… *broody*.

Wei Wuxian was just settling his hair pin back into place and contemplating how to break the quiet when Lan Wangji abruptly said, "I apologize."

Wei Wuxian blinked. "Why?"

Lan Wangji pursed his lips. "I should not have used your personal name without permission."

Huh. Now that he mentioned it, so he had. "That was a little strange," Wei Wuxian noted. "Why *did* you do that?"

"Wuxian is an unusual name. It would have drawn more attention." Lan Wangji shook his head. "Still. We have no custom of courtesy names now, but I know it was rude to use a personal name without permission. I should have discussed it with you."

Wei Wuxian chuckled. *Should have discussed it* – when he was quite sure that the problem hadn't even occurred to Lan Wangji until that very moment! Really, the man was *too*

conscientious sometimes. “Well, that is easy to fix. I give you permission!” he said breezily, shrugging. “You may use *Wei Ying* when you want to.” He grinned. “In fact, you may use it always! And I will use Lan Zhan.”

Lan Wangji gave him another *look* at that. Grin broadening, Wei Wuxian skipped ahead on the path and turned around to face him again, walking backwards as he singsonged, “Lan Zhan Lan Zhan Lan Zhan Lan—”

“Wei *Ying*.”

He beamed. He rather liked that, actually! For all intents and purposes, he’d effectively ceased to be Wei Ying from the moment he’d become Wei Wuxian at fourteen – a year early, but after Jiang Fengmian had made him head disciple it had been politically expedient to grant his courtesy name as well. Jiang Cheng had refused to use his personal name after that because he thought it was “beneath a sect heir’s dignity” – hardly the first or last time Jiang Cheng had opened his mouth and spouted Madam Yu’s words. Jiang Yanli had quietly started calling him “A’Xian” in private, which was nice, but… it was kind of nostalgic to have someone use Wei Ying again!

Lan Wangji huffed and looked away, but Wei Wuxian could tell that the man was amused as he turned onto another side path that took them back to the canal that seemed to mark the historic district.

Which was interesting, actually. The old Caiyi had been very much a water town of canals and boats, but apparently that hadn’t expanded with the city. Maybe digging new canals had simply been deemed too much work?

Or maybe the canals were just part of the whole presentation of the “old” city, because as they strolled along it was becoming more and more obvious that the whole “historic” aspect was definitely as much a matter of presentation as reality.

Well. Lan Wangji strolled, hands tucked back as he continued down the path at his usual steady, measured pace. Wei Wuxian, on the other hand, was having far too much fun bouncing from storefront to storefront, trying to guess what era a particular set of wares represented, and which ones were really a hopelessly messy hodgepodge of “well, it *looks* old” without any effort to specify what, exactly, that meant! Like that bundle of paper and brushes…

Wait. Wait wait wait wait *wait*...!

Wide-eyed, Wei Wuxian poked his head through the shop door, and then cheered and darted inside, because they had *paper*!

And just as he’d hoped – a quick, focused scan of the contents, and there they were: bundles of mulberry paper stacked on the shelves. Not actual talisman paper – that would be asking too much! – but he’d worked with supplies he’d scrounged from alternative sources before, back when the Wens had been strong-arming the merchants and crafters who usually provided the sects their supplies into exclusive trade contracts. It just took an extra step to

infuse the paper with the energy patterns needed for talisman work. And this was clearly good, high-quality paper; it would be easy to prepare.

He breathed a sigh of relief. After setting the wards on Lan Wangji's home and the museum storehouse, his own supply was running *very* low; he hadn't exactly had a lot left on hand when he'd been getting ready to leave the Burial Mounds, since paper in *any* form was not exactly easy to get in a poor village like Yiling. And he was still feeling out how modern paper differed in durability and spiritual resonance from the paper he'd been accustomed to. And if Lan Wangji was going to help him with cleansing the dragon bones, then it would be best to use familiar tools, rather than trying to make do with unfamiliar materials. When doing complex talisman work… well, it was better to *know* how a surface would respond.

Besides. If all went well, eventually Lan Wangji or Wen Yuan – or someone else! – would want to learn at least the basics of talisman craft. And that was definitely *not* something to do with makeshift materials!

So. Marking that excellent discovery in his mind, Wei Wuxian set out to see what else was on offer.

No cinnabar, he noted immediately. Which was interesting, if not all that surprising. Even – especially – with every local landholder and warlord with aspirations to power using vermillion as a mark of status, cinnabar was not exactly easy to get your hands on. And going by Wen Qing's comments, the people of this era took the toxicity of cinnabar *far* more seriously. But there was a *dazzling* array of inks, from the familiar inkstones he knew to bottles of ink that apparently was already prepared for use. And alongside the usual black was a dazzling array of vivid colors in every tone imaginable – including a variety of brilliant reds. And, of course, a suitable selection of brushes of various sizes and styles and materials…

And then there was *everything else*.

Colored paper! As well as papers that, in an interesting echo of the seeds in the strawberry sorbet, seemed to deliberately eschew the smooth even surfaces that he associated with quality but were now completely standard, in favor of artful textures and materials – were those *flower petals* embedded in that? And then there were the other writing tools; he'd gotten accustomed to the pens and pencils that seemed to be standard in this age, but why had no one mentioned that they came in *colors*?! And it seemed that Lan Wangji's "highlighters" were part of an entire *category* of pre-inked brushes – they even came in *sets*. Not to mention that as he was rummaging through those, he came across chalks and even what seemed to be sticks of colored *wax*. Which… writing *with*, not *in*, wax? Some talismans were designed to be burned, there were *possibilities* there! Not to mention the potential of talismans more resistant to the effects of water…

…*Wait*.

Wei Wuxian caught himself mid-rummage with a wince. Because he wasn't the first disciple of Yunmeng Jiang anymore – there *was* no Yunmeng Jiang. There was no sect account he could charge purchases to. And he didn't have any money on him; there hadn't been much point in the Burial Mounds, and what things he'd needed from Yiling he'd generally handled

through barter and favors. For that matter, he didn't even know how money even *worked* in this new era.

He stared wistfully at the colorful box of pencils in many hues, then sighed and went to put them away. He could and probably should request the paper and a high-quality ink for the cleansing, but the rest… Well, it was unlikely that the store would be going anywhere! He would just have to come back later when he'd gotten himself better sorted out—

Lan Wangji reached over and plucked the package of pencils out of his hand, depositing it in a plastic basket the man was carrying on his elbow. A very, very *full* basket.

"I will handle payment," he said, clearly having guessed the source of Wei Wuxian's hesitation.

Wei Wuxian spluttered. "Lan Zhan! That's not necessary!" He might not know the specifics of how money worked now, but he certainly knew that you had to pay for quality goods!

"Art is part of your work," Lan Wangji said. "You require supplies."

Huffing, Wei Wuxian gestured at the basket, taking in the multiple types of paper, brushes, inks, pens and pencils. "That doesn't mean getting me everything I look at!" he protested. He'd been so caught up in his browsing that he hadn't even noticed Lan Wangji following behind him!

Lan Wangji met his eyes steadily – and didn't look away as he reached out, picked up a box of the wax drawing sticks, and added it to the basket as well.

Wei Wuxian threw his hands in the air. "You do *not* need to be so smug!"

"I am not being smug," Lan Wangji said calmly, which meant that apparently the Lan aversion to *bald-faced lying* was not something that had been passed down! "It is practical."

"You are absolutely being smug," Wei Wuxian shot back. "Fine! It will be your responsibility when I become lazy and spoiled."

"Your terms are accepted," Lan Wangji said, unperturbed. He turned and headed to the counter where the shopkeeper waited, apparently aware that he would not get away with any more *buying things on the sly*, now that Wei Wuxian was on to him!

Wei Wuxian watched with interest as Lan Wangji settled the fee – although it took him a minute, because the girl at the counter was doing a very poor job of hiding her giggles at their antics as she placed the items into a pair of intriguing bags made of net-woven string that Lan Wangji produced from a pocket. Somehow, he was unsurprised that when the time came to pay, Lan Wangji pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and held it over a small screen for a moment, until it (of course!) beeped cheerfully. Apparently the little device really *did* do just about everything!

Making a mental note to ask how the system worked, Wei Wuxian met Lan Wangji at the door of the shop. He *tried* to at least grab one of the bags to carry, but Lan Wangji pointedly

held them out of reach as they walked back outside.

Wei Wuxian *meant* to pout about that, but he was distracted. While they'd been inside, the wind had shifted slightly, and now it carried the familiar scent of open water, which meant… "Are we almost to the lake?"

"We are close," Lan Wangji confirmed, nodding ahead to one of the footbridges crossing the canal a short distance ahead. They'd passed several along the way, but this one was larger – and, now that Wei Wuxian was not preoccupied exploring his immediate surroundings, he could see that the buildings beyond the bridge seemed to fall away from the sides of the canal suddenly. Opening onto the docks of Lake Biling.

Which were an interesting echo of the canals, Wei Wuxian noted with interest as they crossed the bridge and came to the edge of the lake. The lake he remembered had been as much a transportation corridor as anything else – one of the reasons why the Wens had targeted it with the waterborne abyss, no doubt. But while there was no shortage of boats to be seen, they appeared to be for pleasure rather than work. Even the handful of fishermen he saw on the water were casting single lines; no one seemed to be drawing in nets for the market. And some of those boats…!

Wei Wuxian eyed one giant monstrosity painted in gaudy enough colors to make even an emperor of the fallen Han blush, and resolved to ask about that later, once they were away from the crush of people flocking to the storefronts lining the docks – now *there* was something that hadn't changed much across the ages! Although he did note that, as with the canal path, these were all permanent, established storefronts. With an interesting preponderance of restaurants, too.

"Wei… Ying?" Lan Wangji said, hesitating ever so slightly over the new form of address. "Do you wish to rent a boat?"

Blinking, Wei Wuxian turned to see that, yes – there did appear to be a section of the dock set aside for boats that could be rented. Lan Wangji, on the other hand, was hesitating at the start of what seemed to be a walking path skirting the edge of the lake, looking at him uncertainly.

Wei Wuxian smiled apologetically – doubtless Lan Wangji had misunderstood his focused attention on the boats. "Just looking!" he assured the man, lengthening his steps to catch up. "Walking is nice!"

And it didn't exactly lack for interesting things to watch, either! The crowds eased significantly once they were out of the immediate vicinity of the docks, but it was obvious that walking the lakeside was a popular pastime. He saw a few families – ah, a miniature wheeled carriage for small children, clever! – and several elders walking with the brisk determination of someone with somewhere to be. But the majority…

Grinning, Wei Wuxian bumped his shoulder against Lan Wangji's. "Lan Zhan! You didn't say that the path was for courting!"

Because there were quite a few young couples out and about! It really was quite charming. And interesting; apparently the lack of chaperones he'd noted in the bookstore tea shop really

was standard practice. He was getting the impression that courtship in general was far more relaxed than it had been in his time.

Lan Wangji's ears reddened. "The path goes around the lake; the entire area has been set aside as a space for recreation. It is considered one of the top scenic locations in the province. I come here regularly."

Wei Wuxian smiled knowingly. "And do you come here regularly in company?"

Shoulders stiff, Lan Wangji pointedly kept walking without answering. With a chuckle, Wei Wuxian decided to let it go; he could always tease the man later!

Although he did have to admit that he was curious. So far as he could tell, Lan Wangji was unmarried – despite being well of an age for it, from a good family, personally accomplished, and… well, *himself*! Which really seemed a shame, and made him wonder about this time's standards of eligibility…

Then again, some people simply had no interest in such things. It was possible Lan Wangji was one of them; it would certainly fit his overall demeanor.

And while he'd been musing, Lan Wangji had said something. "Eh?"

"Lake Biling. Is it as you remember?"

"Hm!" Wei Wuxian glanced around, considering the question. Ah, they'd gone beyond the dock area now, and the crowds had thinned enough that – for the moment – there was no one else in sight. A good time to ask questions with answers that would be difficult to explain.

"It is a bit different," he admitted. "For one, it was the edge of Caiyi, it was not *inside*!"

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. "The city has grown greatly in the past fifty years alone," he admitted. "The contrast to your time must be even greater."

Hm. There was that *fifty years* again. Interesting. "The shape is different, too," Wei Wuxian added. "It is like the Cold Springs! If I came here and did not know…"

Then it would have been irksomely *familiar*, but not recognizable, at least not to the point of surety. Not without something to prove it, and unlike the Cold Springs, he hadn't graffitied his name anywhere on the lake.

Although there was one possible proof that he very much hoped would *not* still be there to find.

Lan Wangji hummed in consideration as the path they were on dipped down to a plank walkway built out over the shallows of the lake itself, apparently forced away from the shore by a cluster of old stone buildings. "I had not considered that. I should have. The mountain changed; the lake would have as well, especially given periodic droughts and floods." He hesitated when he realized Wei Wuxian was no longer pacing him, pausing to look back. "Wei Ying…?"

Crouched at the edge of the walkway, Wei Wuxian tossed a grin over his shoulder. “Just checking something,” he said, and then dipped a hand into the water.

And *hummed*.

Really, he wished he’d had this trick figured out back during that chaotic trip to the lake as a guest disciple. Back then, he’d had the nagging sense that something wasn’t *right*, but he hadn’t yet figured out how to *listen*. Things might have gone better back then if he had.

Or maybe not! But he had the trick of it now.

The hum rippled out with the water, less demanding than the sharpness of a whistle, more… quietly inquisitive. And what whispered back was…

Well. First and foremost, *not* a seething mass of water corrupted by the taint of uncounted untimely deaths, which was definitely a good start! Granted, he hadn’t *really* expected the waterborne abyss to still be lingering after fifteen hundred years – among other things, there would have been far fewer boats on the water! But… Gusu Lan hadn’t had *time* to do a proper cleansing before Cloud Recesses burned, and it had been some time before they’d reestablished themselves. Even after the war, it would have been a while before they recovered enough to tend to a problem that was at least nominally under control.

Of course, *nominally under control* covered a broad range of sins… and properly cleansing a waterborne abyss could be the work of decades, during which the world would *not* be holding still.

But regardless of what had happened in the past, it was gone now!

Not that the lake was free of resentment. That would be asking too much. Water tended to carry such things, and like water, they tended to accumulate in the lakes. And in some of the spots he could feel…

Well. Rivers and lakes had also been used to get rid of inconvenient bodies for a very long time. He couldn’t exactly say he was surprised.

A slight shift in his humming eased those back to their rest, as he mentally marked their locations. None of them were particularly recent, nor were any in immediate danger of rising as water ghouls or the like. They could wait a little longer to pass back into the cycle of reincarnation.

Because frankly, he was of the opinion that if you were going to help the restless dead pass on, it was just good sense to find out what had *made* them dead and to see to it that it didn’t happen again. And he didn’t yet know what this age’s version of a magistrate would think of ghosts with bones to pick with the living!

More troubling, at least for the moment, was the sense of… *malaise* in the water. It wasn’t resentful energy, exactly. It was more a generalized sense of *not-right*ness diffused throughout the lake; there were pockets here and there where it seemed to have gathered – or perhaps those were where it originated?

Granted, some of the malaise was easy enough to figure out! Tainted water had its own particular twist of energy, not resentment but something only a half-step sideways from it. The Jiang had been diligent about their waters – the lotus rising from the muck was a pretty image, but *poisoned* water meant poisoned roots. And dyes could be a messy business, with nasty by-products that often ended up in the water if not watched carefully. To say nothing of tanning leather, metalworking…

But there was something else as well. Almost like a burned-out tree after a fire went out of control; not a guai, exactly, but something of the same *feel* about it, if diffuse. Almost like an old battleground that had never accumulated enough resentment to actually demand cleansing and so had gone unnoticed and untended, far from the main dragon lines.

Which made no *sense*! Leaving aside the fact that Caiyi was a significant city… Lake Biling might not be the massive lake of Yunmeng, dominating the fengshui of the region, but it *was* one of the key links connecting the dragon lines of the mountains with the rivers of the lowlands that fed into and out of the lake. Even with the waterborne abyss lurking in its depths, the qi of the lake itself had been strong, unaffected by such transient things.

But the flow of qi in the lake now was… muddled. Confused. Weak – like a current with no clear outflow, or a river that had silted so thoroughly that it no longer had a single clear channel to follow.

Surely the rockslide that had changed the face of the mountain couldn't have made *that* much of a difference! It might have scrambled the qi flow of the immediate area a bit, but the dragon lines of the land itself…

Then again. Fifteen hundred years. Wars, plagues, famines, floods… and at some point, there hadn't been any cultivators seeing to the dragon lines anymore.

Well! At least he'd have plenty to keep himself busy. Smiling wryly, Wei Wuxian shook the water off his hand and straightened. "It is not very clean, is it?" he commented to Lan Wangji, who was waiting patiently a few steps away, watching with interest.

"It is not," Lan Wangji admitted, looking out over the water. "Nie Huaisang was correct that Caiyi is not as bad as the greater industrial cities, but the lake was still heavily polluted during the Great Leap Forward initiative."

Hm. *Industrial* he could guess from context and the book about inventions, but… "Polluted?" he asked. Because that was clearly a reference to being *not clean*, but he'd discovered that Lan Wangji liked to be very precise with his words, so it was probably something specific.

"Pollution is… when the environment is made unclean by the disposal of waste or other by-products of industry into natural systems, either by design or through carelessness," Lan Wangji said after a moment to consider his response. "Pollutants are often toxic, and harmful to people living in the affected area." Looking at the lake again, he sighed. "Lake Biling was the subject of a deliberate cleanup campaign, and conditions have improved… but between lingering problems and the growth of the city around it, it cannot be called *clean*."

Wei Wuxian huffed, reluctantly amused. “Some things truly do not change, then! People think that what is put in water is *gone*, because water washes. But it is not. And water notices what does not belong in it!”

Lan Wangji’s blink was becoming a familiar one – a sign that the man was once again re-evaluating things that he had previously taken as basic truths. “The *water* notices,” he echoed carefully.

Wei Wuxian hummed as they resumed walking. “Water does not think. There is not a mind. But it has… knowing. And the things in it, it carries.”

Lan Wangji was quiet for a minute as they walked. “The lore I have seen claims that running water cleanses resentful energy,” he said at last.

Wei Wuxian snorted. Oh, he’d just *bet* it did!

But he also made sure to smile at Lan Wangji. After all, it wasn’t his fault that people were lazy and preferred to simply settle for out of sight, out of mind. “Water *washes away*,” he emphasized. “But a thing that goes away is also going *to*. And that can make a problem!”

One he knew very well. Yunmeng was a land of lakes and rivers… which meant that every time another sect got lazy and tried to make a watery problem just *go away* rather than shoulder the burden of actually dealing with it, it tended to go right into Yunmeng. That was half of what had made Wen Ruohan’s ploy with the abyss so insultingly obvious – Lake Biling was not a natural catchment zone for the lowland rivers where such things usually formed!

Lan Wangji nodded slowly. “So spiritual pollution is much the same as physical pollution. That is good to know.” He tilted his head slightly. “Did you find what you were looking for in the lake?”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “I did not, and that is a very good thing!” Grinning at Lan Wangji’s silent inquiry, he explained, “Before, there was a… hmmm.”

Pausing for a moment, he tapped his cheek as he considered his options. Finally, he shrugged to himself and mentally backed up a few steps. “When there is a lot of death and resentful energy in water, they get mixed up. The deaths *become* the water. It is a very bad thing to happen; it is very, very hard to cleanse, because the qi of the water is warped.”

“That sounds similar to what you described in the Burial Mounds,” Lan Wangji observed.

Wei Wuxian grinned at him. “It is! They are very similar. But the warped water is smaller.” Thankfully! “And it is more… active.”

Lan Wangji looked at him. “Active.”

Wei Wuxian let his grin go a little crooked. “The Burial Mounds were not good. But they did not *pull* people into them. The warped waters…” He shook his head. “During the lessons at Cloud Recesses – there were,” bother, he didn’t know how to say *drownings*, “people dying

in the water. The Gusu Lan thought the reason might be water ghosts." Not actually ghosts… they'd have to go over the vocabulary for the variety of ways the restless dead could manifest! Especially if he was going to take Lan Wangji on a practice run or two before they tackled the dragon bones. But it would do for now.

"I assume it was not water ghosts," Lan Wangji said dryly.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Well. There *were* water ghosts. They happen around warped water, after all. Which was the problem!"

Lan Wangji's lips thinned ever so slightly. "With actual water ghosts present, you would prioritize them. The warped water would go unnoticed, until it struck."

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "Well. We *did* figure it out before that! But it had pulled the boats to the middle of the lake. Getting away was tricky." More like *messy*. It was fortunate that the abyss could not do anything *beyond* the water; once they'd been on their swords, they had been safe. "Lan Yi was very not happy. Jiang Cheng was the heir of Yunmeng Jiang. If something happened to him, it would be very bad for Gusu Lan."

Lan Wangji considered that. "I am surprised they let him participate, then. Surely they would have heard of an incident severe enough to result in warped water? Even if they did not expect it to have washed into the lake, they should have considered the possibility."

Ah, he should have expected the man to consider that. "They should have," Wei Wuxian agreed. "If there had been an incident."

Lan Wangji looked at him sharply.

Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly. "What is washed away is also washed *to*. Not everyone forgets that."

Lan Wangji drew in a slow breath, obviously connecting the timelines. "The Qishan Wen guided it there."

Oh, the man *was* quick! "So we thought," Wei Wuxian said. "Although there was no… hm. Thing that would show what had happened, if Qishan said that it was not them? And no one wanted to say that!"

Not that they'd made much use of the time between then and the war. He wondered if maybe that was *why* Wen Ruohan had done it that way. The more he accustomed the sects to pretending that everything was normal, the more he could *do* without tipping things into open warfare. Witness how even *after* the indoctrination mess and the burning of Cloud Recesses, Jiang Fengmian had still clung to the idea that diplomacy might fix things.

Granted, that also meant that *after* the war, there were nearly a full decade's and more worth of grudges lingering. Especially after Wen Ruohan had been so rude as to die on an assassin's sword, rather than a properly dramatic duel!

He had wondered, more than once, if that was *why* the Jin's spy had struck when he had. So that no one would emerge as the glorious hero, and all that anger would curdle in the sects, easily redirected towards a convenient target.

He sighed.

"Wei Ying?"

"I am wondering what happened to the remnants of the Wens," he admitted. "It… did not go well for them, when they lost the war."

Lan Wangji closed his eyes for a moment. "I imagine not," he said. "Particularly given what you have told me of the Wens' conduct during the war."

Wei Wuxian snorted. "Ah, but," he said dryly. "The truth is that the Wens did not do anything that the other sects would not have done if they had been able!" Would and *had*, over the years. Not every water-based haunt that ended up in Yunmeng had gotten there by accident… and while it had never happened in Jiang Fengmian's time, there had been Jiang leaders in the past who were not averse to washing the problems back *out* again. With prejudice. Not always in the direction they had originally come from.

Besides. "And when the war was over… there were many who wanted to be *another* Wen Ruohan. Just smarter."

And quite a lot of that jockeying for power had involved eyeing the creator of a cultivation technique that, under the right circumstances, could allow a single cultivator to fight an army. Which had *not* helped Jiang Cheng's issues in the slightest; he'd been convinced that if he'd still had his core, the other sects would never have dared to be so rude as to blatantly attempt to lure away Yunmeng Jiang's *head disciple*. And, well… he was probably right about that.

The problem was that all the assurances in the world couldn't get him to understand that *Wei Wuxian* didn't care about serving a coreless sect leader. Wei Wuxian had a feeling that egging on that furious defensiveness was half of why the offers had kept coming.

Sighing, he shook his head to clear it. Done was done, after all. Fifteen hundred years later, what difference did all the petty politicking and concerns about face even make?

"Going after the Wens… that was not… seeking to do what was right. To *make* things right." Hm. Now that he had to talk *around* the word because he didn't actually know the new term for it, *justice* really was a tricky concept, wasn't it? "They did it because they were angry. Because no one cared. Because they *could*."

Especially the Jins; the one sect *least* damaged by the Wens had profited very nicely by flaunting their humiliation of the survivors. Although he didn't know how much of that had been political calculation and how much… Well. The Wen sect had not held a monopoly on slime like Wen Chao who glutted themselves on the power to hurt or kill on a whim.

Lan Wangji was studying him, pale eyes unsettlingly knowing. Really, who told that man he was allowed to *look* at someone like that! "You did not agree with it."

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “The war was over.” Then he smiled wryly. “And most were… people. Some were good, some were not… but people. I met many, in Yiling.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes sharpened. “At the Burial Mounds?”

“Near,” Wei Wuxian corrected. “It was… bad land. No one wanted it. But the Burial Mounds were so close, people did not want to come to make trouble for them there! And after I started cleansing the Burial Mounds… it was not *as* bad. So they liked me!”

Well. Once they’d gotten over being terrified of him, at least.

The credit for which should probably go to stubborn little A’Fang, who had been so desperately *determined* to continue his training that he’d followed Wei Wuxian *everywhere*, including places that a barely trained junior disciple no older than Sixth-shidi had been had no business wandering! Wei Wuxian wasn’t sure when the change had happened, just that by the third or fourth time he’d walked back into Yiling thoroughly exasperated with a stubborn child slung under his arm, the others had stopped flinching away from him and started laughing *at* him instead.

He’d come to Yiling more often, after that. He couldn’t *train* the young former disciples like A’Fang, not in the ways of their sect – but he could at least give them tips, and tools like the lure flags to help keep them a little safer, even without access to spiritual swords.

Lan Wangji did not say anything for a moment as they continued walking. As they came into sight of another section of docks, however, he said, “Yiling is not a large town; I do not know if they have records going back that far. But perhaps we could arrange to visit it eventually.”

Wei Wuxian brightened. “That would be interesting!” Yiling had been past that first precarious edge of survival or starvation, but it had still been a very small settlement; it would be good to see how it had fared. Not to mention that he was curious to see what the Burial Mounds were like now.

Although… “I also have been curious… Wen Qing and Wen Yuan. It is the same character.”

Lan Wangji blinked. “I… have no idea. It would be very difficult to trace their family name back far enough to verify. Although it would be interesting to look at a demographic map, to see if the name *Wen* is more common in that region.” He exhaled. “If they were descendants… that would be a remarkable coincidence.”

Well, yes. It *was* odd to think he had popped out of fifteen hundred years in ice to be met by a Lan descendant and a Wen one! All they needed was a Jiang or two and they’d have a set!

Although, thinking about it, the fact that the Jiang hadn’t showed up felt very in keeping with Jiang Cheng’s usual grumpiness.

And… Lan Wangji was giving him an oddly hesitant sideways look, like he was deciding whether or not to say something. Catching the man’s eye, Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows in open invitation.

“Yiling is not far from Wuhan – what was once Yunmeng,” he said. “If you would like to visit there as well.”

…huh.

Wei Wuxian paused, turning that thought over in his head. Because… well. Caiyi was one thing; outside of a few illicit excursions and that very exciting incident with the waterborne abyss, he’d never had much to do with the city. Cloud Recesses he had far more memories of, but they weren’t really intimate, personal memories – even his friendship with Lan Yi was something that had grown far more on campaign than in the lecture hall. Not to mention that he’d had plenty of time to accustom himself to the new layout independently of old memories – and he had Wen Yuan and Lan Wangji and his other new acquaintances there! And as for Yiling… frankly, that anything had survived at all was more than he could have reasonably hoped for.

But for almost ten years, Yunmeng had been his home. Maybe not always happy or stable, but a far cry from the streets before that! He’d cultivated his core there, trained the junior disciples, haggled with merchants and flirted with shopgirls to make them laugh. Hunted pheasants, shot kites, stolen lotus pods.

Even just in the time after the war… He vividly remembered how unsettling it had been to watch as Jiang Cheng used the spoils of the war to rebuild the old buildings bigger and grander. At first it had only been the places irrevocably tainted in Jiang Cheng’s eyes, like the great hall where Wang Liangjiao had made her demands. But even before Wei Wuxian had left for secluded cultivation in the Burial Mounds, Jiang Cheng had already begun talking about tearing down other buildings to rebuild them on a grander scale “more befitting a great sect.” Gradually, Lotus Pier had been feeling less and less like *home*.

And all that had been only a few years of changes! Thinking of what fifteen *hundred* years could have wrought…

Wei Wuxian puffed his cheeks out with a gusty sigh. “I think I may want to wait for that,” he admitted. Because he *was* curious! But he thought he might want to have a little longer to accustom himself to how the world had changed in general before he tried to tackle something so much more personal.

To his relief, Lan Wangji simply nodded without pressing him for details. Not that it was *surprising* that he’d do so; really, the man was being *ridiculously* conscientious about giving Wei Wuxian the space to process everything at his own pace, the power to make his own choices…

But right now, Wei Wuxian found that he was mostly just *tired*.

He allowed himself a breath of a sigh – then deliberately shook his shoulders out. He’d checked the lake, so that was done! And really, it was a lovely day, especially with the breeze off the water to lighten the summer heat a bit. Why linger over maudlin memories when today was supposed to be an *adventure*?

“Wei Ying.”

Blinking, Wei Wuxian started to turn. Before he could apologize for his momentary distraction, Lan Wangji was using a light touch on his elbow to direct him away from the path to the other side of the docks and towards one of the storefronts lining the edge of the lake.

"A restaurant?" he asked as they walked inside and he saw the tables laid out. Not simply a tea shop like they'd visited in the bookstore, but a proper restaurant, and a very nice one at that, with windows overlooking the lake, loosely woven screens pulled down to cut the glare of the summer sun without blocking the view. "It's a bit early to be having dinner, even for you!"

"We did not eat a proper lunch," Lan Wangji countered. "And it will be quiet at this hour. We can rest for a while."

Wei Wuxian chuckled ruefully as Lan Wangji guided him towards one of the tables tucked into the corner of wall and window, wordlessly gesturing for Wei Wuxian to take the seat that put his back to the wall and allowed him to watch the room. So he'd noticed… Three years (and fifteen hundred!) years after the war, and Wei Wuxian still wasn't comfortable sitting with his back to a room, even though he'd done it any number of times to make a point. "I suppose I just did not expect to be tired so suddenly," he admitted; no point in denying the obvious, when Lan Wangji had clearly seen straight through him!

"We have done many things," Lan Wangji said, setting the bags of writing supplies on an empty seat before claiming the one across from Wei Wuxian. "And for you it was all in a language that is still unfamiliar. That demands active, conscious effort. It is *work*, and as tiring as physical labor."

Wei Wuxian had to laugh at the earnest sincerity of the man's words. After all, Lan Wangji wasn't wrong! Now that he wasn't… well, distracting himself, he could feel the concentration headache lurking in the back of his skull.

Although… "Have you traveled?" he asked curiously. Because Lan Wangji's words had the air of experience!

Lan Wangji didn't answer immediately; the restaurant's waiter had come over. Wei Wuxian let Lan Wangji handle the order; it was clear that he already had something in mind, and Wei Wuxian *mostly* trusted his choices. As long as coffee wasn't involved.

As the waiter walked away, Lan Wangji turned back to Wei Wuxian. "I visited Europe for a month, after I finished my studies. I was familiar with some of the languages, but even so, the experience was… difficult."

Europe… ah, the lands to the distant west, that had once been the far end of the great Han trade caravans, until the collapse of empires throughout had effectively shut such trade down. "What languages do you speak?" he asked, curious now. The modern tongue he was learning seemed to serve as the dominant language of the central kingdoms as they existed in this age, but he already knew that there were plenty of regional dialects, since that was their cover story for his own accent.

Although that raised an interesting question: were any of those dialects related to the tongues of the Tuoba peoples who had settled in the northern lands, or the Man hill folk, or any of the other handful of languages from his own time that he had picked up over the years? Then again… even if they were, by now they must have changed at least as much across the centuries as the Han language.

And Europe was very far away – likely their languages were even more different, since they didn't share a common source!

"I am fluent in English," Lan Wangji said. "It is a necessary skill in international academic circles." He hesitated, before adding, "You… may wish to learn it as well. Uncle did not exaggerate when he stated that our project was of great interest to many. English will be the dominant language of many discussions."

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. "That does not sound like a wish. It sounds like a must!" he observed wryly. He still wasn't clear on all the politics that surrounded his situation – why would people care so much about a random corpse, anyway? But he knew *very* well that the only way to keep arguments like that from happening *to* you was to make yourself a part of them from the start.

Lan Wangji inclined his head, acknowledging the point. "As for other languages… I learned to read French and German as part of my studies; most early folklorists wrote in those languages. But when I traveled, I discovered my skills in the spoken languages were… lacking."

Wei Wuxian desperately bit back his laughter at the subtle twist of lips that might as well be a full-on *pout* from Lan Wangji, because he sympathized, he really did, even before this mess he'd had plenty of experience fumbling his way through trade pidgins and picking up new languages on the fly. And being a cultivator helped; certain meditative practices enhanced the mind's ability to absorb new information, and his use of Empathy with ghosts often included a bit of crossover knowledge for things like language…

But really! The mental image of a younger version of the concise, articulate Lan Wangji scowling and fumbling his way through an unfamiliar language was just too adorable! How was he supposed to keep a straight face?

Lan Wangji gave him a look of long-suffering tolerance as the waiter returned bearing a tray laden with an array of dishes that he began laying out on the table. Fast service! Although Lan Wangji was right that they'd come during a slow period – there didn't seem to be any other customers aside from the two of them and a woman lingering over a pot of tea as she frowned at the computer she had apparently brought with her. And the dishes Lan Wangji had ordered were all the sort of things that could be made up in the morning and kept simmering throughout the day, mostly soups and the like…

Then he blinked. Because many of the dishes were *familiar*. There was even a small pot of pork rib and lotus root soup!

Lan Wangji nodded at his startled expression. "This restaurant specializes in the foods from the Tang Dynasty, and from many different regions. I suspect that the flavors will be slightly

different from what you recall; the Tang were cosmopolitan in their trade. But I hoped it would be at least somewhat familiar."

Taking a sip of the soup, Wei Wuxian hummed his appreciation. It wasn't Jiang Yanli's recipe – that would be asking too much! And the flavor profile *was* a bit different, but not all that much. Which was almost a shame, given the sheer variety and abundance of new spices available now… but familiar was good, too.

"It's good!" he said cheerfully, and noted the way Lan Wangji's shoulders eased slightly, the barest curve of a pleased smile hiding at the corner of his mouth. Ah – he'd likely been concerned after Wei Wuxian's response to the question about Yunmeng.

"Is that common, then? Deliberately recreating the foods of the past?" he asked curiously as he explored the other dishes. One or two were completely new to him; the rest were like the pork rib and lotus root soup, mostly familiar but for small changes in ingredients and flavors.

Granted, *all* of it was a made with the sort of richness and quality ingredients that would normally only grace a sect leader's table!

He did wonder what the recipes were based on. Family recipes handed down across generations? Or were they like the version of his time's language that Lan Wangji had learned, pieced together from old documents and educated guesswork?

"It is more common for a restaurant to focus on a particular type of dish, or the food of a specific region," Lan Wangji said. "Particularly after advances in farming and trade allowed individual regions to focus on growing crops for sale, rather than devoting their land to subsistence farming."

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. Now that was an interesting thought. And not an entirely new one – after all, farmers had always looked for ways of supplementing crops, so that they wouldn't be in danger of starving if there was a bad year and bandits or tax officials got greedy. He could see the advantage of letting the lands where grains grew well focus on those, while others focused on fruits, or livestock. Done properly, the risk of famine would be significantly decreased…

Of course, do it *wrong*, or have a bad storm or frost hit the grain-growers, or let the trade networks die down, and there would be a great deal of trouble indeed.

"It was also the result of tourism," Lan Wangji added, picking up his chopsticks. "Many of the agricultural advances happened during the Yuan Dynasty, and with the addition of new crops from the Americas. Then people began to travel more, especially during the Ming. At first it was to visit temples and sacred places, but…"

"After some time, more people began to travel because they could?" Wei Wuxian concluded, grinning. After all, the impulse wasn't exactly anything new! He'd actually been considering doing something similar once he left the Burial Mounds, taking the long route back to Yunmeng if it looked like the political situation was still stable. Secluded in the Mounds, he hadn't exactly been up to date on what was happening…

Oh, that was not a fun thought. He'd mostly been thinking of what had happened to him from *his* side of things, but if there really had been someone waiting to ambush him when he left… odds were good that the political situation beyond Yiling had been anything *but* stable.

Something to look into later, when they were back in Lan Wangji's office with all his records and books. For now, however, there was a lovely meal in front of him and no point in wasting it!

The meal itself was quiet, as per Lan Wangji's preferred habit, and Wei Wuxian honestly didn't mind indulging him; he hadn't been wrong about the effort of communicating in a language that was still unfamiliar, and while talking to Lan Wangji was very enjoyable… well, the rest was also welcome.

Although he couldn't help noticing that Lan Wangji seemed to be deep in thought, eyes flickering up on occasion to look piercingly at Wei Wuxian, but just as often gazing through the gauzy dark red screen over the windows and out across the lake.

So it wasn't entirely a surprise when, once they were nursing the last of the teapot together – and, come to think of it, he'd been so entertained today that it hadn't occurred to him to look for Emperor's Smile! – Lan Wangji looked at him and said, "The Flower Maiden. Was that… common?"

Wei Wuxian blinked at him. "She was the only Flower Maiden that I knew about. Or do you mean the poetry?"

Lan Wangji huffed softly. "I phrased that poorly. Nonhuman beings cultivating to a human form. Was that common?"

Ah, so that was how they phrased it! Good to know. "It was not *common*!" he chuckled, amused. "It was a very special," he knew this word, what was… ah, "…accomplishment. And it could go wrong – I told you about the Xuanwu! But yes, it was…" What was the phrase Wen Yuan used sometimes? "…a thing."

Lan Wangji was quiet again, clearly turning that over in his mind. Wei Wuxian nursed his tea and waited, simultaneously amused and sympathetic. After all, he was *very* familiar with having your world turn topsy-turvy on you with only a few words at this point! Although he would be lying if he said it wasn't a *little* gratifying to know that he wasn't the only one going through it.

And he wasn't really surprised that *this* was the point Lan Wangji had stuck on. He remembered the look on the man's face back when they'd first talked about the Xuanwu. He wouldn't blame anyone for being unsettled at the thought of *that* existing in a world where they had been thought only stories!

But more than that… cultivation was strange and unexpected, yes, but it was a thing people *did*, and therefore might *not* do. But…

Lan Wangji released a slow breath. "I do not understand," he said quietly. "The Xuanwu. The Flower Maiden. The tainted water. Ghosts. They are all natural phenomena. There is no

reason why they would cease to appear in the world."

Wei Wuxian tapped the edge of his cup with a finger, watching the amber liquid ripple. "I have a thought?"

Lan Wangji inclined his head in invitation.

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, considering his words. "Resentment is not *just* anger, sadness, fear… Those happen often! *Resentment* happens because a thing is not fair. Is not right." No, that wasn't quite it… "It happens when a thing is not the way one thinks that the world should be." There. That was better.

Lan Wangji considered that. "In folklore, the most dangerous ghost is a bride – a woman about to marry – who dies before the marriage is complete. Most say it is because she is in a liminal place between the two families…"

"Well, that does not *help*," Wei Wuxian said judiciously. "But yes. A person who fights does not *want* to die, but it is not unexpected." Although more than a few battlegrounds were haunted by conscripts who'd never wanted anything to do with a fight. The Burial Mounds among them. "But a bride is not expected to die! It is *opposite* what is expected!"

Lan Wangji nodded, and waited.

Thus far, he hadn't said anything all that unusual – although there would be plenty of old guard who would argue about the distinction between *fair* and *expected*. Mostly the ones who never had to deal with all the ways the world was *not* fair.

However.

"So! Make that *bigger*," he said. "The Han – they were around a long time. Good or bad, people knew what to expect. But then!" He waved a hand, smiling ruefully. "They are gone! Who rules today may not rule tomorrow. The world is not what people think it should be. And then wars. Famine. Sickness. Bad things are worse, and seem more worse."

"You are saying… in a time of instability – when things change easily, or lack balance – negative emotions are more likely to accumulate. Making it more likely that ghosts and such things would manifest?"

Wei Wuxian brightened. "Yes! That is my thought. But also, this… instability? The whole world is easy to change… so why not also trees, flowers, Xuanwu?"

And while the Sui hadn't lasted all that long, the following Tang had ruled for *centuries*. Long enough, maybe, for the world to stabilize. Long enough for the accumulation of resentful energy to actually be *dealt with*, rather than kept to a dull roar. Perhaps *that* was why cultivation had faded from use.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. "The past two centuries, China has been far from stable," he observed. "So why did they not manifest then?"

Wei Wuxian shrugged wryly. “It is a thought, not a certainty!” And if he had a wuzhu for every silly cultivator who tried quoting his own theories at him as if they were facts, he would not be so concerned about paying for things now!

But also… “And who says that they did not?” he asked pointedly.

Lan Wangji blinked.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “As you say – things were not stable! Many things happening, people are distracted… and, I will guess, unlikely stories and people believing strange things became more common. Perhaps things did happen, but no one noticed. Or believed the ones who did!”

Lan Wangji seemed to think about that. “That is possible,” he said slowly. “But… things have been less unstable recently. If such things happened… where are they *now*?”

Wei Wuxian huffed, remembering a dark cave and a lake choked with putrid corpses… and empty of the monster he’d fought there. “That is a question, isn’t it.”

OMAKE:

The shopgirl in the stationery store texting her friends…
bored bored boooored
oooo two hot models just walked in the day is redeemed!
daaawwww the bouncy one is squeeing over the art supplies, socute
uh-oh looks like he forgot his wallet that is a heartbreak face and I did not sign up for this
just realized his Serious Friend was following behind him the whole time putting every single thing he squeed over in a shopping basket
eeee serious friend is insisting on paying SO CUTE
ROFL serious friend just added a pack of crayons *with a face of Try Me*
best day ever

(Lan Wangji’s Face Of Try Me: insert image of a fluffy snowy white purebred cat maintaining unflinching eye contact as he tips the glass of red wine off the counter and onto the carpet.)

Lan Wangji listening to Wei Wuxian explaining how environmental disruption can warp the qi of water: “So, Godzilla being triggered by nuclear fallout devastating the environment… isn’t actually that far off the mark?”

NOTES:

The big question Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji discuss at the end of this chapter was also one of the biggest worldbuilding challenges of this fic. Because if I want Wei Wuxian to be a cultivator from the ancient past, waking up in The Modern World™… then I need to figure out what happened to all the other fantastical elements of his setting, and why we haven't been overrun by fierce corpses in the absence of cultivators…

The skate park scene demanded I add it after the last chapter's skateboard cameo… because my plotbunnies were dying of laughter at the thought of how those poor unsuspecting skateboarders are going to react when the news breaks.

An interesting thought: while fanon casts the Wen settlement as on the very edge of starvation throughout their existence, by the time Lan Wangji does his fly-by visit the settlement is stable enough that they have enough surplus to dedicate some of it to wine, and Wei Wuxian can apparently get his hands on the materials to experiment with building the compass – meaning metals and the tools to shape them, which are *not* cheap. That last is even more interesting when you consider that the compass would be useless in the Burial Mounds, meaning it would only be of use to them as a trade item. And by the time of Jin Ling's ceremony, they can afford a small amount of very fine materials for that clarity bell he makes as a gift. So I actually read them as having achieved at least a certain measure of stability.

(Which, to me, is important for understanding Lan Wangji's inaction: consistently throughout the backstory, he only ever sees the *aftermath* of a crisis, he's absent for the crisis itself; even at Nightless City, he only arrives after the fighting has started, he doesn't see what *started* it. The same with the Wens: contrary to what CQL does – and this is part of why I don't like even the *idea* of that scene in the rain during the escape! – he never actually *sees* them at the worst. The Wens are stable when he sees them, so there's no urgency, and no *clarity*. Nothing to give him the push he needs to confront the moral dilemma of a situation where "the right thing to do" isn't simple and obvious. It's not until Jiang Yanli is killed that Lan Wangji manages to be witness to the *whole story* of an event.)

And it's worth also noting that the *fruit wine* they make in the Burial Mounds means there was fruit – and because fruit-bearing plants generally take several years to get established, that means they were growing wild *in the Burial Mounds*. Which also means pollinators, and likely the creatures that feed on them. Meaning that there *is* a functional ecosystem that includes some sort of fruit-bearing plants, at a minimum. Not to mention that if Chenqing is made from bamboo from the Burial Mounds (canon never actually says)… bamboo is *also* edible under the right conditions. So yes, depending on season it would be fully possible to survive on foraging.

And, an interesting sidebar? I've read several fics that featured Wei Wuxian receiving a jade dizi as a gift for this or that reason. Which makes sense in terms of Expensive And Therefore Fancy… but while I'm no expert, I ran across a claim that hard materials like jade actually result in a *poorer* sound quality than regular bamboo! So my plot bunnies just had to get that in…

Wei Wuxian as scholar is an aspect of his character that doesn't get nearly as much love as he deserves. He *canonically* killed time while bored in Cloud Recesses browsing through the library, and any references he worked with during the Burial Mounds Settlement period

would have been *from memory alone*. Let the guy be nerd, geek, goth and jock all at the same time! They are not mutually exclusive!

And let me note here that Wei Wuxian is both an artist and an inventor who works with a magical technology based on *writing*. Of course he's going to go kid in candy store over a stationery shop. And yes, he's contemplating the cultivation-related applications of crayons. Amazing what options occur when you don't have it in your head that something is only for children!

(The scene in the bookstore is partially based on my own experience in Japan. Let me tell you, there are few things more frustrating as a bookworm than walking into a bookstore in your second language and realizing you know just enough to navigate but not enough to browse!)

Strawberries as we know them were created in the 1750s. Thank Vathara for alerting me to that interesting bit of trivia… and then I got to the coffee shop scene and the plotbunnies started squeaking about how it would be so cool to include that…

(Never trust squeaking plotbunnies. Although honestly, if they've progressed to the squeaking stage you're already doomed, RIP, might as well sit back, enjoy the ride, and pray that the squeaking wards off the other plotbunnies advancing in your blind spot… although really, your odds there are about 50/50 of them just joining forces instead…)

And then Lan Wangji introduces Wei Wuxian to chocolate for the first time by having it stolen off his spoon, followed by Wei Wuxian unknowingly asking a classic First Date question. RIP.

Fun thought: given that MXTX moved the age of courtesy names to fifteen (as opposed to a historic twenty-ish), Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji would probably have just gotten theirs when they first met. That got me thinking that part of Wei Wuxian playing around with names was him adjusting to that change. So the bunnies decided to spin off that… (Wei Wuxian getting his early because it would look bad for the Jiang to have a head disciple without that mark of adulthood is a headcanon that I'm using because it will be handy for another story I'm considering.)

Given that resentful energy being carried by water, at least with encouragement, is canon with the whole waterborne abyss? You could actually make an interesting story out of Yunmeng Jiang having grudges against other sects because they tend to just shove recalcitrant water problems downstream rather than going to the expense and effort of cleansing them – meaning they send them into Yunmeng Jiang's watershed. It would make for an interesting source of conflict, especially if the other sects really did think that "wash it away" was a permanent solution that actually fixed the problem!

(Alternatively – if you go by historic locations? Yunmeng Jiang would have been *upriver* of most sects. They might use the trick themselves…)

As a side note – given the location of Gusu and the description of Caiyi as a water town, it's probable that "Lake Biling" is meant to be Lake Tai. But Lake Tai is *enormous*, to the point

that I have trouble picturing the action of the story happening there… so I'm handwaving that to one of the smaller lakes in the area!

(Also, I think it's hilarious to picture Lan Wangji watching as Wei Wuxian dips a hand in the water humming a cheery little tune… with no clue that it's because he's doing the necromancy equivalent of, "Hi, just checking in, how are things doing down there?")

And speaking of plotbunnies, an interesting thought: while it is theatrical and dramatic to have the Enemy Leader be the Boss Fight for a thrilling final battle, that's not actually how war *works*. We don't know any details about the actual battles in the Sunshot Campaign (something that threw me, reading the book for the first time, after fandom seemed obsessed with it – I assume because CQL expanded that part of the story, whereas in the novel the specifics of the war were actually completely unimportant), but my impression has always been that the assassination of Wen Ruohan happens *after* Nightless City has been breached – after all, Lan Xichen managed to get into the palace while Meng Yao was getting Nie Mingjue out. In which case, strategically, *the Sunshot Campaign had effectively already won*.

Which raises an interesting question: why assassinate Wen Ruohan *then*, and not earlier when decapitating the enemy leadership would have yielded a strategic advantage?

I see two possibilities. One is Jin Guangshan (or Meng Yao!) either dragging things out so attrition would weaken the sects, or hedging his bets in case the campaign went badly. But also? You *know* just about every sect leader fantasized about being the one to take Wen Ruohan's head… and instead he's stabbed in the back. Not even out in public for everyone to see! And by the son of a prostitute rather than a Noble Sect Leader! Imagine how disgruntled they must have been!

And disgruntled people are easy to manipulate…

Also: One thing I'm playing with here is that really, the sects should have been jockeying to see if they could lure Wei Wuxian away from the Jiang – especially since they're canonically jealous! Which I actually think is what Jin Guangshan was pushing for in canon. Remember: he's the one using those rumors to drive a wedge between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian… right after Jiang Yanli has made a *public* stand declaring Wei Wuxian as her family. It's not hard to imagine him angling to set things up so that, when Jiang Yanli marries in, things will be tense enough in the Jiang that Wei Wuxian might *accompany* her to Lanling…

In this fic, there's no Jin Guangshan-level plotting… but with Jiang Cheng having lost his golden core, he would look weak enough that they'd be willing to be more blatant about trying to court Wei Wuxian away. In addition, there was no Lan Wangji in the Xuanwu's cave in this AU. Wei Wuxian survived and defeated the Xuanwu, but he only drove it off; he didn't kill it. Meaning no access to the corrupted sword, and thus no Yin Hu Fu. Which also means no tempting artifact for the sects to plot to acquire; if they want the power of Wei Wuxian's cultivation, then they need Wei Wuxian. And thus, they would need to court him, rather than ostracize and target him.

I've seen arguments made that what happened to the Wen Remnants would have been considered justified historically, based on the fact that wiping out whole families was a not infrequent punishment historically. But – leaving aside whether or not that was actually

considered morally acceptable in historical circumstances, that still leaves the question of whether that has any impact on the society in the *novel*… and my impression is that it doesn't. For one thing, the sects *lie* about the Wens in the Burial Mounds after the fact. And when the juniors who only know the official version find out what happened, they are *appalled*… and the people involved hem, haw, and point fingers to direct the fault elsewhere. Which is, effectively, an admission that they *know* it was the wrong thing to have done.

Then there's the fact that the Wen Remnants had *already* been judged by the sects and sent to live in a tiny section of their former territory… until Jin Zixun deliberately pulled a Wen Chao by driving a yao into that area and then using it as an excuse to round everyone up and cart them off to the labor camp. And this includes Wen Qing and Wen Ning, close relatives of Wen Ruohan, among the people who were left more or less to their own devices. The sects had *already* passed judgement on what the Qishan Wen did under Wen Ruohan.

Then again. You can only kill people once. But living people to direct everyone's scorn against are *useful*.

And it is rather telling that the sect behind the labor camp and the abuses therein is also the sect that took the *least* damage from the Wens, isn't it?

Although I do suspect that part of what happened at the labor camp was… well. Stanford Prisoner Experiment. Given the right conditions and leaders who condone or even just ignore brutality… The Jin didn't have the *grudges* of other sects, but frequently the power to do something can become its own justification.

Chapter 15: Cleansing

Chapter Summary

After a practice round, it's time to deal with the oracle bones.

Chapter Notes

This chapter gets into the mess that was the Cultural Revolution and then Tiananmen Square, because once I realized that Lan Wangji would have been about four or five when the latter went down… yeah.

(To be honest? I don't pretend to be well-versed in modern Chinese culture, but I look at the scapegoating and victim mentality and mob mentality in the guise of justice in MDZS, and I get the feeling that it's based far more on the laogai camps, the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution than anything to do with ancient history…)

Additionally: there's a bit of swearing in the last line of this chapter. Because Nie Mingjue decided to sum up a situation very succinctly.

WARNING: This chapter involves mention of canon-level Body Horror – think Yi City. It also discusses the death of a student on campus, including contemplations of the usual causes of such deaths. This includes a passing reference to suicide, although no main characters are involved.

Wen Yuan swallowed, wishing his throat didn't feel so treacherously dry. "Will you laugh at me if I say I'm a little scared?"

Wei Wuxian did laugh, but it was warm rather than mocking, and he reached over to ruffle Wen Yuan's hair. "To be a *little* scared is not a bad thing," he said cheerfully. "Scared means you are paying attention!"

That surprised a chuckle out of him. It was really funny when Wei Wuxian said stuff that sounded like a line from a movie, when Wen Yuan *knew* he'd never seen those movies. But then again, Wei Wuxian's life would probably *make* a great movie…

Wei Wuxian's hand dropped from his head to pat him on the shoulder. "Don't worry!" Wei Wuxian grinned. "In my day, by your age I went on night hunts alone often!"

Wen Yuan snorted. Wei Wuxian had picked up the "in my day" phrase from a curmudgeonly old guy character in the novel they were reading, and he'd adopted it *gleefully*. Sticking his tongue out, Wen Yuan objected, "When you were my age, you had been training for years! And you had a *sword*."

Wei Wuxian snorted. "When I was your age, I was fighting a *war*," he said dryly. "To start slow is not a bad thing."

Um. Point. As noted, his life would make an awesome movie… but generally speaking movies weren't the sort of thing you'd want to *live*.

Wei Wuxian patted his shoulder again. "As for swords – that, we will work on! But for now…" A broad, toothy grin. "You cannot hit a ghost with a sword anyway, so!"

Wen Yuan groaned as the man cackled and skipped forward a few steps to walk alongside Lan Wangji again. *You just* had *to remind me!*

Huffing, he glanced around and tried not to shiver as he picked up his pace slightly. Which was *stupid*! It was a nice evening! Still warm, but the setting sun had brought a light breeze that made the temperature pretty much perfect, and it was just late enough that most of the students staying on campus over the summer had gone off to do whatever for the evening, so they had the grounds pretty much all to themselves. During his quarantine period he'd taken walks around this time *all the time*! It should not be *spooky*!

Except that when he went on his walks then, he hadn't been walking around *knowing* that there were ghosts out there. Or at least *a* ghost.

He was kind of regretting all the times he'd teased Lan Jingyi about his hatred of horror movies now.

Professor Lan, of course, was unflappable as ever, even with his guqin slung across his back in its case. "You refer to it as a *night* hunt," he observed. "Is the time significant?"

Wei Wuxian hummed, tilting his hand back and forth. "Sometimes," he said. "And sometimes not. But resentful energy moves easier at night, so the name has stuck. And some things manifest more at some times."

"Like what?" Wen Yuan asked. Only a little to distract himself. Seriously, he was being ridiculous. He wasn't even the one who was going to be doing the exorcism, that was going to be Professor Lan's job! He was just coming along to watch!

Wei Wuxian gestured to the deep blue twilight surrounding them. "This time, after the sun is set – it is good for little things. It is a time that is *changing*. Day is becoming night. It helps things manifest." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Before sunrise – that is similar. But those spirits are rarer. They are usually leaving! Sunrise is when ghosts say goodbye."

Huh. That was… kind of a nice thought, in a sad sort of way.

Wen Yuan braced himself. “What about midnight?” he asked. Because if dusk and dawn were when the *little* ghosts came out…

Wei Wuxian’s grin had teeth. “Oh, after midnight is when the *not* nice ones come out. And that is why it is called a *night* hunt. At night they are stronger, maybe, but they are more… hm. Easy to find, easy to deal with.” He tapped his cheek thoughtfully. “Cleansing the bones – that should be at night.”

Lan Wangji was too dignified to sigh, but Wen Yuan could practically feel the resignation. The professor was very much *not* a night owl.

Wei Wuxian apparently noticed as well. Cackling, he poked at the professor’s cheek. “Ah, you are very *Lan*,” he said knowingly. “I never knew how they survived night hunts, when their sleep time is better at telling time than your clocks!”

Lan Wangji tilted his head slightly. “If night hunts are so important to cultivation, I find it odd that such a strict schedule continued.”

Wei Wuxian blinked, then chuckled. “That is because they are not. To do night hunts is responsible, yes – and also a way to act important and get money! But one does not *have* to hunt. And the Lan way was to be… separate from ordinary life. Distance. Only study, only cultivation. All other things were secondary.”

Wen Yuan blinked. That was… okay, it did make sense, it just… didn’t really fit with the whole image he had in his head of the heroic cultivator going out and fighting demons and monsters and stuff.

Lan Wangji just nodded, though – so maybe this was something they’d talked about. “What of the ghosts here?” he asked, returning to the original topic.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “They should be mostly not dangerous!” he said. “This is a school; to die here is usually accident or sickness, is it not? Such ghosts are not so strong.”

Wen Yuan shifted his shoulders uneasily. Because he was getting better at hearing the way Wei Wuxian sometimes talked around things, and *usually* wasn’t the same thing as *always*. There had been a kid from his school who’d committed suicide after failing the Gaokao earlier that year. And Mo Xuanyu didn’t talk about it, but Wen Yuan was not stupid; he knew why the older boy did everything he could to avoid going home, even with the hazing he got on campus sometimes. And the hazing itself… well. He’d seen news reports about “regrettable accidents” when a “joke” spun out of control.

He didn’t know what kind of ghost would come from that, but he was willing to bet they wouldn’t be the “mostly harmless” type.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian knew what he was doing, and he’d been very clear that this was just a practice run so that Lan Wangji could get a little experience before they tried to tackle the oracle bones in the archives. He wouldn’t have picked anything actually *dangerous* for that… and even if it *did* turn out to be dangerous, he was going to be right there helping them.

Which… only helped a *little* bit, as Wei Wuxian directed Lan Wangji to begin setting up his guqin in a small meditation garden against the south-facing wall of one of the dorms that was unoccupied for the summer. Which was good, that meant they wouldn't draw an audience…

And Wen Yuan was still almost vibrating out of his skin, because he knew this garden! He *liked* this garden! He visited it all the time!

Although, now that he thought about it, for some reason he'd never come here after dark…

Wei Wuxian looked up from his careful scrutiny of Lan Wangji's setup to raise an eyebrow at Wen Yuan. "Jumpy?" he asked.

Well. He'd already admitted he was scared, there wasn't much point in trying to be macho now. "Yeah," he admitted.

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Thought so. Congratulations, a ghost is nibbling you!"

Oh. Huh. Okay, that made sense… Wait.

"*What?!*"

Wei Wuxian clapped his hands. "And this is the first lesson!" he announced gleefully. "Ghosts need yang qi. The easiest way to get it is to scare people. So! That means?"

Wen Yuan's jaw dropped more. Was he seriously…?

Lan Wangji inclined his head slightly. "If they are able to manifest visually, they will likely do it in a manner intended to frighten or unsettle."

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Correct!"

"You mean the whole jump-scare thing is actually a *thing*?" Wen Yuan blurted.

Wei Wuxian blinked at him. "Jump-scare?"

"Um… when something suddenly jumps out and scares you." Wait. "Or maybe it's more, making people jump because they've suddenly been scared?" Wen Yuan scratched his head awkwardly. "I guess I never really thought about what it meant. It's… you see a sudden scary thing and get startled." Okay. He could do this. It actually *was* like a horror movie, actually… analyzing it made it less scary. Huh. "So… they make themselves look scary, if they can."

Wei Wuxian beamed at him. "Yes! Exactly." Then he raised an eyebrow. "So. What if they *cannot* make themselves… manifest visually? Able to be seen. What then?"

Wen Yuan gulped, and wished he could convince himself to stop *twitching* at every little rustle of the magnolia leaves, because his brain kept wondering if that was *really* the wind and not Something Out There…

…oh. Oh, he was an idiot! Wei Wuxian had even *told* him… "They'll make things *spooky* if they can!" he said, grinning despite himself. "Because that makes people nervous, so they can

tap more energy, and the more they get the more they can do!" And if it was like the oracle bones… Wei Wuxian had said that being young made Wen Yuan more vulnerable – plus, Wei Wuxian was a cultivator, and Professor Lan was… well, he was *Professor Lan*. Of course a ghost wouldn't go after them!

Which, granted, wasn't exactly a fun thought for him. But he couldn't help the warm sense of accomplishment at Wei Wuxian's approving smile, before the man raised his eyebrows again. "And? If that is so, what does that then mean?"

Okay, he could do this… "If you're looking for ghosts, you should start with places that feel spooky, especially if they shouldn't," he suggested. "And… maybe look into places that people tell scary stories about?" He frowned. "Although people are pretty good at making up spooky stories, so you can't count on that, I bet."

Wei Wuxian laughed and ruffled his hair again. "Ah, you are *very* clever!" he said. "That is true! Sometimes a place is… spooky? …for other reasons. Maybe the fengshui is bad, or maybe people are just telling stories. But." He raised a finger. "Stories are not just talking. They can do things to places. Sometimes a ghost is there because the place is spooky, not the other way. So it is important to not assume. The ghost and the story may not be the same!" His smile turned wry. "And: people do not always know the truth – or tell it if they know. Never forget that."

Ow. Yeah, that would be a problem…

"If ghosts require yang qi to manifest," Lan Wangji said thoughtfully, hands moving over the strings in a familiar set of warm-up exercises, "it may be necessary to deliberately allow a ghost to draw from your qi, so that they may speak for themselves if they are too weak to manifest otherwise."

Wei Wuxian's smile… did something complicated, wry and sad and surprised and then vanishing in the next half-heartbeat as he rocked his hand back and forth again. "It is a way to do things," he agreed. "But it is a risky way to simply allow a ghost to take. Even a ghost who is nice will try to take too much sometimes. It is safer to have a tool between." He nodded to the guqin. "Music is a good one! It is a way to let a weak spirit speak."

"Like the dizi?" Wen Yuan asked.

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Not so much!" he admitted. "Even a weak spirit can make strings move. The dizi needs a strong breath! And fingers. It is better for other things." He shrugged. "I use a different way. I *hear*. Which is both useful and not useful sometimes!"

This time Wen Yuan was ready for the expectant look. "If you can hear them, then that makes finding them a lot easier," he suggested. "And you don't need to do a lot of setup."

"But if there are many, you may not be able to pick out a single voice, especially if they are weaker than others," Lan Wangji added. "And… it would be difficult to *not* listen, which could be distracting."

“Correct!” Wei Wuxian said cheerfully. “It also is fast. Inquiry needs first finding, and then to find the correct questions to ask, which takes time.” He clapped his hands briskly, dropping down onto the bench facing Lan Wangji. “Which is part of this. The ghost here is a little ghost. Little ghosts can be tricky! They are less dangerous. But they are hard to find, and they… hm. They *want* – all ghosts want. But they do not always have things that they *know* that they want.” He huffed, smile wry. “And they are much harder to just hit to make go away! In my time, a ghost so weak? Cultivators would not bother with one. It is too much work and no… reputation?”

Wen Yuan frowned. “But… aren’t cultivators *supposed* to deal with ghosts?”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow, smiling crookedly. “Cultivators *cultivate*. That is all. There is no *supposed to*… although most cultivators cultivated *because* they are supposed to as part of their clan tradition!” He shrugged. “It is as I said. To night hunt is responsible! But usually, it is done for money and reputation and power. Large sects would not hunt until a death had happened.”

Wen Yuan opened his mouth, then closed it. Because… well, yes. The goal of spiritual cultivation was supposed to be immortality, both in the original tradition and in the version that had made its way into fiction. The Daoist immortal, detached from the mortal world, wasn’t exactly a figure of justice and noblesse oblige. It was just…

“I guess I’m just… used to the idea that cultivators are supposed to be the heroes, you know?” he admitted. And then felt even sillier, because even in xianxia, most cultivators weren’t really *heroic*, that was the whole thing that set the main character apart from the rest. But somewhere along the way, he’d picked up the notion that those heroic main characters represented what a cultivator *should* be, and the less heroic ones were somehow failing that ideal. And they *were*... but the moral imperative they were failing wasn’t actually intrinsic to *being* a cultivator.

And, logically… cultivation *and* being a good person were both *hard*. So it really shouldn’t have been a surprise that if most cultivators did it because it was a family tradition, they probably wouldn’t be inclined to bother with the inconvenient parts. Powerful people shirking ethical responsibilities was hardly new!

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Some care, some do not. It is a matter of who a person is, not cultivating.”

And yes, that did make sense, and he got it, but… “It *shouldn’t* be that way, though,” he grumbled. “If you’re going to deliberately go and give yourself superpowers, you should be responsible for using them right!”

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly and reached over as if to poke his nose. “Ah, you are Lan Zhan’s student, to say that!” he said, with a warmth that had Wen Yuan’s cheeks flaming even as he hastily ducked out of range.

Although… he couldn’t help noticing that Professor Lan’s ears had just turned very, very red as well, even in the low light of the garden lamp. And this time he hadn’t huffed about the *Lan Zhan* thing.

Wei Wuxian laughed and let him escape the poke. “So! We have found the ghost,” he said briskly. “And the next thing to do is…?”

“We must learn what the spirit needs to move on,” Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. “So we must. But you are forgetting an important thing.”

Wen Yuan frowned, then smacked his face when Wei Wuxian pulled a piece of paper in a now-familiar shape out. Right. “Wards, because we don’t know the ghost’s name yet, so we want to limit how far away we might be calling from.”

Wei Wuxian nodded as a flick of his hand sent the talisman to anchor itself in the center of the paved circle. “Correct. But it is also possible that even if you call the ghost by name, another spirit you did not call might follow it. And Inquiry takes time, so you do not want something to interrupt in the middle!” He tilted his head slightly, then looked at Lan Wangji and nodded.

Wen Yuan listened with interest as Lan Wangji began to play. He hadn’t learned any of the guqin-based cultivation techniques yet, which was… well, a *little* disappointing, but mostly a relief. He’d only seriously started learning the guqin for real two years ago, and he was definitely still only a beginner. *Definitely* not at the level of being able to reliably produce the incredibly specific notes that formed the guqin language of the Gusu Lan! But he had been allowed to sit in on the theory lessons, which were fascinating in their own right. Like the fact that the guqin *itself* needed to be charged with qi from an experienced player, so that the ghost’s intent to communicate would translate into the strings correctly.

“After all, being a ghost does not mean you are now good at playing a guqin!” Wei Wuxian had laughed.

Which had then gotten them off on a tangent about what would happen if the ghost didn’t actually speak Mandarin, because if it was just *intent to communicate* that translated to the strings, that would be one thing, but there were things you could say easily in one language that would take forever to explain in another, and what about names that didn’t have the tones and syllables built into the guqin language?

Had he mentioned that it was utterly *awesome* that the ancient magic superpowered cultivator was a shameless geek?

But the other reason Wen Yuan wasn’t trying to learn musical cultivation himself yet was… well, he wasn’t ready. Apparently between Professor Lan’s intense graduate career and his exercise habits and just… well, everything, he already had meridians strong enough to channel the sort of qi needed for the technique. He didn’t yet have a reservoir of qi to draw from, so he could only put so much power into the technique in the first place. But he had been using his guqin for a long time, which made it easier for him to build up a store of energy in the instrument to draw on when he played.

Which was why they were doing this, so he could practice actually *using* his qi through the guqin before the big cleansing project. And so that Wen Yuan could actually see the theory he’d been learning put into practice.

Which was probably a good idea, because even knowing how this was supposed to work, Wen Yuan almost jumped out of his skin when Lan Wangji lifted his hands off the guqin… and the strings *kept playing*!

Yes! He *knew* that was the whole point of this! And yes, he'd seen Wei Wuxian's sword fly and wards and the creepy not-darkness in the museum, but this was a ghost! He really, *really* owed Lan Jingyi *such* an apology!

Oh man. This was going to *explode* the whole physics versus metaphysics debate about the existence of souls and minds independent of physical bodies, wasn't it? Qi was one thing, but ghosts…

Belatedly, he realized he'd been so… okay, yes, he'd been freaking out, and as a result he'd missed the first round of notes. It didn't help that they were soft, almost inaudible – and, yikes, no wonder Wei Wuxian had said Inquiry required mastery of the guqin, because it just hit Wen Yuan that interpreting the answers correctly would require having *perfect pitch* to tell the notes apart correctly.

Lan Wangji listened intently, the faintest of furrows on his forehead as he leaned closer to the strings to hear the faint vibrations. "…Long Fengli," he said after a moment. "I do not recognize that name."

Wei Wuxian just nodded. "That is not a surprise. She has been here for a while."

Wen Yuan winced. Suddenly, despite everything, this felt less spooky and more… just *sad*. Because yes, things sometimes did happen; Cloud Recesses wasn't a big university, but they still had several thousand students. Just on random chance alone, things were going to happen.

But it wasn't *common*, and people *knew* about it when something happened. So if Professor Lan didn't recognize her name… she'd probably died before he'd even been a student here. That was a really long time to just be… lingering.

Suddenly, Wen Yuan was really glad they were doing this. Sure, it was spooky, but they were *helping* someone who'd really needed it for a really long time.

Lan Wangji's hands settled on the strings again, but when he looked at Wei Wuxian, the cultivator just raised an eyebrow pointedly. Wen Yuan had to bite back a laugh; he'd gotten that look from Professor Lan often enough to know it: *This is your homework, I'm just here in case you need help*.

Lan Wangji inclined his head, then played another short segment. But this time, he frowned as the strings vibrated in response. "I… did not hear all of that," he admitted.

Wei Wuxian hummed, nodding. "Try again," he said.

Wen Yuan frowned as Lan Wangji played the sequence again. Because Wei Wuxian was still humming, and if the problem was that the ghost's answers were too quiet in the first place…

Except that *this* time, the answer rang across the little garden, almost as loud as Lan Wangji's playing. Startled, Wen Yuan looked at Wei Wuxian – who winked at him, still humming cheerfully. Which meant he was probably boosting the ghost somehow.

Lan Wangji frowned. "She was a student – but she did not say from when."

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Time does not mean to ghosts what time means to living. But is it important?"

"…I suppose it is not," Lan Wangji admitted after a moment, even though Wen Yuan could practically hear the historian's instincts shouting that *of course* such details were important.

But they weren't here as scholars, they were here as *cultivators*... and it didn't take long at all to figure out why Wei Wuxian had encouraged him to prioritize. Because it became very obvious what he'd meant by Inquiry being a *slow* method; every bit of information they gathered required a meticulous process of trial and error to figure out the right questions to get the answers they needed, and double checking the answers to be sure they'd understood correctly, and by the time they'd gotten the information they needed Wen Yuan was yawning despite his own nerves.

Which made him feel terrible, because Long Fengli's story was just… sad, in a way that made his heart hurt.

In a way, the worst part was how *simple* it was. She'd been a student living in the dorm next to the garden, but one night, she'd forgotten her keys and ended up locked out overnight. It had been cold and raining, and by the time someone noticed and let her in the next morning, she'd been hypothermic and coming down with pneumonia… and that was the last thing she remembered.

It was just… dying because she'd picked up the wrong coat on her way out to hang out with friends and forgot to check the pockets. One of those stupid little things that *everyone* did now and then… but bad timing and bad luck, and she'd *died*.

And apparently had just haunted the garden outside her dorm ever since, which… wait. "If she got sick, wouldn't they have taken her to the hospital?" he asked. "Why is her ghost here and not there?"

"They may not have realized the severity of the illness in time," Professor Lan said quietly.

"And it may not have mattered," Wei Wuxian added. "The place of dying is not always the same as the place of death." He patted the bench he was sitting on. "The moment that mattered most, that was *here*, and so her ghost is also here. Which is good information to have!" he added brightly.

Which was… actually interesting, Wen Yuan noted. Because that cheerfulness wasn't *in spite* of the sad story they'd just heard. It was… well, yes, a lot of it was just who Wei Wuxian was. But it almost felt like he was… sharing it. With them, with Long Fengli's lost ghost, or maybe just in general. It was… nice, to be around that sort of energy in a person.

…aaand he should focus, because Wei Wuxian had just tossed out another figure-it-out question and he'd been woolgathering. Huffing at himself, Wen Yuan chewed his lip as he mentally poked at the issue. The problem was, he was starting to get what Wei Wuxian had meant when he'd said that the little ghosts could be the hard ones. Because Long Fengli didn't really seem to *want* anything in particular. There was no murderer to bring to justice, no body needing a proper burial, so…

"If she's haunting *here*… maybe she needs someone to let her in?" No, that didn't seem right, especially when there would have been *dozens* of chances for that to happen over the years. "Or maybe we need to get her keys?" Although that could be tricky. The university had updated the locks to ID card readers a long time ago. Still, there were probably physical keys that could be used just in case, right? Nie Mingjue would probably know…

Wei Wuxian raised a finger. "Ah! You are close. But continue the thinking. She needed her key, *why*?"

"Warmth," Lan Wangji said quietly. "Her death happened because she was cold and alone. So what she seeks is warmth and company."

Wei Wuxian smiled. "Exactly!" he said – and then waved that raised finger. "That is also what can make little ghosts dangerous: they do not want to be alone. They do not mean to hurt! But they can… hm. Pull others with them, like a person who has fallen in deep water."

Wen Yuan bit his lip again. That… made sense, really. And if ghosts also needed energy from living people to do things… Even if they didn't want to hurt anyone, it was easy to see how it could happen.

"But!" Wei Wuxian said cheerfully. "She is not a strong ghost, so there is not much danger. And it is summer, so *warm* is already here!" He looked at Lan Wangji. "You have learned Rest well. So, a challenge! Can you add summer to it?"

Hands resting lightly on the strings, Lan Wangji considered that. "I believe I can," he said at last. "Is it a necessary step?"

Wei Wuxian tilted his head and shrugged. "Is it necessary, no. She is a small thing, she will go easily. But why not? There is no harm in the trying." He grinned, twirling his black dizi easily. "I will help if you need!"

Lan Wangji inclined his head in acknowledgement, and began to play.

Wen Yuan was fairly familiar with the melody for Rest at this point, since he'd listened to Lan Wangji practicing plenty of times. But it took him a minute to place what was different this time, until a naggingly familiar sequence of notes jogged his memory and made it all click: Lan Wangji had added a countermelody based on summer festival music, although he'd slowed it a little to complement the quieter cultivation song…

And he actually *felt* the way something in the air seemed to sort of… just fade away, leaving the garden… well, just a garden again.

Wen Yuan sighed, shoulders slumping just a little bit. He felt oddly muddled, a weird mix of relieved and glad and sad. “She’s gone?”

Wei Wuxian nodded, lips quirked in a smile that made Wen Yuan think that maybe he wasn’t the only one who felt a bit complicated. “She did not need much.”

Well. At least it had been easy—

Later, Wen Yuan would kick himself. He watched xianxia! He knew better than to tempt fate like that!

Because that thought was still *sitting in his brain* when suddenly the ward flared *red* as something – someone – *something* appeared in the air with the suddenness of slamming into a wall.

Wen Yuan stared, a half-strangled yelp lodged in his throat, as the thing clawed at the air with *literally* bony fingertips that ended in long, raking talons.

Traitors! Betrayers! Your *fault…!* Blackened flesh bubbling and smoking off a skull with the jaw dropped open to reveal sharp-pointed teeth, it *reached—*

Wei Wuxian stepped in front of it, lips pursed. “I had the thought that you might show up,” he said dryly.

The ghost *flinched*, pulling back without actually moving, starting to fade out of sight.

“Ah!” Wei Wuxian made a sharp gesture, and a second ward appeared, talismans that Wen Yuan hadn’t even noticed in the trees suddenly flaring up. The ghost flinched again, but this time in the opposite direction, the shadowy outline suddenly coming into focus. “You wanted attention. And so you have it.”

Wen Yuan gulped, unable to help staring.

The figure that manifested the second time was… more human, now. No fingerbone claws or rictus grin of needle-sharp teeth. Now he was… well, a man, maybe in his mid-twenties, with short-cropped hair and wearing a Zhongshan suit… and black void where his eyes should be.

“Wei Ying.” Professor Lan’s voice seemed calm, but his hands were frozen half-hovering over the strings of the guqin. “What…”

Wei Wuxian hummed absently, arms crossed as he watched the ghost flicker and *twist*, smoke and bones momentarily visible before it reverted reluctantly to the form of the man. “There was a fire in Cloud Recesses, maybe fifty years ago,” he said. “If I am right, our friend here started it. And died in it.”

Lan Wangji was still for a moment, before he deliberately removed his hands from the guqin. “The arson incident during the Cultural Revolution,” he said, face and tone utterly neutral.

Wen Yuan swallowed again. He knew about the incident; it was part of the history of the museum. Fourteen people had *died*. But… “If he’s the one who *set* the fire, then why…”

Wei Wuxian huffed, smiling ruefully. “Ah. It is not actually uncommon. Very often it is the one who caused the killing who is the nastiest ghost. The… hm. The sense of who-I-am says that they are right, they are the victim, that they may do anything they like and there will be no bad result for them.” He shrugged. “And then bad results happen! No! This cannot be!”

Wen Yuan’s startled laugh was maybe a little… frantic. But it broke through the deer-in-headlights paralysis that had gripped him – which was probably why Wei Wuxian had done that. “Is that why he’s…” He hesitated and waved his hands vaguely, not sure how to express the whole weird *twisted* feeling the ghost was giving, the way he kept going between almost human and something that didn’t seem really human at *all*.

He couldn’t hear any more of that fingernails-on-blackboard shouting, at least. But he was willing to bet Wei Wuxian did.

Wei Wuxian huffed, resting his hands on his hips. “That is a piece of the answer, yes,” he said. “A bigger piece is, our friend has been sitting here being grumpy for a while! Resentful energy does not just go away. It usually grows.” He tilted his head. “And he has been eating little resentful things and small ghosts to become stronger. Eat enough, and he will not be a *ghost*, just the core of a collection of resentment. That is harder to deal with.”

Right. That sounded bad, yep. “What do you do if that happens?”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “The first thing is run away!” he said cheerfully. “The core is still the ghost; to deal with that gets all the resentment to stop being one thing, which is very helpful. But to get to it, you must go *through* the resentment. And that is better to plan carefully!” He tapped his cheek thoughtfully. “So, it would be better to deal with our friend *before* that.”

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. “I do not think that his core desire is something that we could grant in good conscience.” As if in agreement, the ghost suddenly whirled and lunged at him. Its shriek of fury when the wards threw it back wasn’t audible, but Wen Yuan still *felt* it crawling up and down his spine.

Wei Wuxian sighed. “It is probably not,” he admitted. “That is the problem with those who must be *right* even when they are wrong.” He studied the ghost again, then shrugged and pulled out another talisman. “Still. He is not a danger *now*, so… perhaps we can find a way.”

When the new talisman snapped into place, *all* the wards flared, and then… contracted, somehow. The ghost snarled and then… it didn’t fade, it *vanished*, so suddenly that Wen Yuan half-expected a *pop* of displaced air.

“Where did it…?”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Liberate, suppress, eliminate. Those are the traditional ways to deal with these things. But!” He wagged a finger. “Do not forget that *suppression* is not *fixing*. It is saving a problem for later only. But until then, our friend will not be making trouble or eating more energy.” Then he bounced on his heels and clapped his hands. “So! Congratulations, you have done your first exorcism!”

Oh. Wow. They *had*. Although…

Wei Wuxian grinned at him as Lan Wangji began re-wrapping his guqin for transport. “Ready to go home and fall down?”

“...Yes,” Wen Yuan admitted. Now that the ghosts were taken care of, the soft summer warmth had crept back into the garden… but suddenly what he really wanted was bright lights, a mug of hot chocolate, and maybe a blanket fort.

…wait. Had anyone actually introduced hot chocolate to Wei Wuxian yet?

“The angry ghost bothered you?”

Lan Wangji blinked as he looked up from reviewing the notes he had written regarding the exorcism. They were in the main room this evening; Wei Wuxian had offered the desk in the guest room to Wen Yuan for the evening, so that he could do his online gaming comfortably. Which was not normally an activity that Lan Wangji was inclined to encourage so late in the evening, but… Well. He was not planning on going to sleep just yet, either.

“It is maybe better not to,” Wei Wuxian had advised quietly. “The first night hunt… it is often difficult. People have unhappy dreams, and those dreams can stay a very long time. It is not a bad thing to stay awake until you are too tired to dream!”

That was intriguing advice, particularly in light of recent research suggesting that forcing oneself to remain awake after a traumatic experience might have beneficial effects for the prevention of PTSD… although such research was notoriously unreliable, given the impossibility of testing the theory under controlled circumstances.

So Wen Yuan was in the guest room, nursing hot chocolate as he alternated research, homework, and the simple satisfaction of completing quests in the latest MMORPG that he and his friends were into. Lan Wangji had claimed the table in the main room to work on his personal notes on his own cultivation studies that he would then draw upon to write the relevant research notes and the daily update for the core project team. Wei Wuxian had opted instead to sprawl on the floor, his own mug of hot chocolate close at hand as he worked, although Lan Wangji wasn’t sure what he was writing – lesson plans, possibly, or a continuation of the cultivation manual. It was hard to tell, at this angle.

It didn’t help that Wei Wuxian’s position meant that when Lan Wangji looked up, the first thing his eyes landed on was a certain *very well-shaped* portion of the man’s anatomy, and he was seriously considering murder right now, because *why* had Nie Huaisang decided that Wei Wuxian’s wardrobe needed the addition of *tight jeans* that left nothing to the imagination?!

Which was not entirely hyperbole. Wei Wuxian had admitted to Lan Wangji that the form-hugging cut of the jeans left him feeling almost more naked than he’d felt when *actually* naked. Which was not a mental image that had done anything to help Lan Wangji’s state of mind.

Lan Wangji did understand why he was wearing them; better to acclimate to modern fabrics and styles in the safety of the Jingshi before he tried venturing into the public eye, especially since Wei Wuxian had admitted to finding the more close-fitting items somewhat

uncomfortable. And he could admit that they were… flattering, as were the other clothes that Nie Huaisang had delivered.

There had been a few items for Lan Wangji as well. He had found himself irrationally irritated to discover that they were, in fact, well-fitted, tasteful, and *comfortable*. Somehow ceding even that much to Nie Huaisang's fluttery manipulation simply irked him.

Wei Wuxian's chuckle belatedly reminded Lan Wangji that he'd been asked a question. Gathering himself, he focused on Wei Wuxian's face and hoped that the man hadn't noticed that it was not only his thoughts that had wandered where they shouldn't. "Could you repeat that?"

Wei Wuxian studied his face, papers forgotten on the floor in front of him – but at least he seemed concerned, rather than offended. So hopefully he hadn't noticed, or had attributed the wandering gaze to Lan Wangji's general distraction. "The ghost from the… Cultural Revolution, you said? It bothered you."

Lan Wangji lifted his hands from the keyboard, flexing his fingers in an effort to clear the phantom memory of strings and *energy* from them. Or perhaps not so phantom; he was still trying to catalog the difference between true qi-sense and simple psychosomatic effects. "He bothered you as well."

"Hmmm…" Tilting his head thoughtfully, Wei Wuxian poked the mostly-melted marshmallow in the hot chocolate, chuckling when a string of semi-solid sugar came away with his finger before nibbling it off.

What could Lan Wangji have *possibly* done in a past life to deserve this?!

"It is little Long Fengli who bothers more," Wei Wuxian admitted.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly, considering that. The girl's fate had been a sad one, but accidents, even tragic ones, were too much a part of life for that to be the cause of Wei Wuxian's pensive mood. And yet Lan Wangji had been under the impression that the exorcism had gone smoothly. "How so?"

Wei Wuxian shrugged, an odd motion with his weight on his elbows as it was. "The ones like the angry ghost – they happen. It is what is. But a little ghost like her… that is not a thing that should happen. Her dying was sad, but it was simple. She had no great things she needed to do, no anger. She was not unburied. She should not have been here! Just the burying rites should be enough."

Lan Wangji considered that. They did not know much about the girl outside of the way she had died, although presumably it would not be difficult to access at least the basic records if they wished to. Still… given what they did know, he could make some inferences. For one, Cloud Recesses had only begun accepting female students in the late 1980s, after the reforms of Deng Xiaoping had taken hold and seemed to be stable. Given that she had apparently lived before cell phones were common enough that even a student might carry one, she had probably lived in the 1990s. In which case…

“Many traditional rituals have been changed or fallen out of use in the past decades,” he said. “She may not have received the correct rites to pass on.”

Which was a disturbing thought. Although not as disturbing as the one that followed; that funerary rituals, like qi theory, had drifted away from their original form, and might no longer be effective.

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips. “That is… possible,” he said.

“You do not agree?”

Lacing his fingers together, Wei Wuxian rested his chin on them. “It is a good theory! And if this were before, in my time, I might not be arguing. But…” He exhaled. “I am thinking about *maps*.”

Lan Wangji blinked. “Maps?”

Wei Wuxian tilted his head slightly towards the bookcase where they had set aside a shelf for his own collection of books. “The world is very, very big! It is bigger than the sects and clans thought. And that means many ways to do things. Even the people of the north I knew – they did not do with the dead what the Han did. But they did not have trouble with ghosts and fierce corpses more than us! So… now I think, it is not doing the *correct* ritual that matters. It is doing the *expected* ritual.”

“That would be consistent with your theory about the disruption of the expected world order contributing to the manifestation of resentment,” Lan Wangji observed, turning the thought over in his mind. It had not occurred to him, but Wei Wuxian was right. If restless dead were truly a natural phenomenon, there was no reason to assume that they were for some reason unique to China. Which meant every culture must have found ways of dealing with the problem. Perhaps not cultivation itself; as Wei Wuxian had pointed out, cultivation was not actually *intended* for dealing with the restless dead, but rather a separate phenomenon that happened to offer useful tools for doing so.

Although upon consideration, it seemed likely that something akin to cultivation would also have developed elsewhere. Legends of individuals gaining beyond-human abilities through asceticism and rigorous training were common throughout the world, although the explanations for the source and nature of those abilities varied widely.

“If unstable times make the manifestation of ghosts easier, that might explain why she lingered,” he mused.

Still… something did not quite seem to fit. Long Fengli had not seemed to perceive her death as a cause for anger against a world that had failed to meet expectations. More than anything else, she had seemed… lost. As if…

“This disruption of expectations,” he said slowly, feeling out the words he wanted with care. “Would it also disrupt the path a soul would normally take after death?”

Wei Wuxian huffed, the corner of his lip quirking up in a wry smile. “Perhaps that is so. But I do not think I have lived in a not disrupted time!”

That was a fair point. How could one know what was normal if one had never experienced it?

“There is another thing.”

Lan Wangji straightened, attention fixed on the strange thoughtfulness in Wei Wuxian’s tone.

Wei Wuxian levered himself up to a sitting position as he turned to face Lan Wangji properly, papers left scattered on the floor next to him – although he did pick up his mug again. “There is something strange about the dragon lines now.”

Given that he had described the dragon lines as being the qi meridians of the natural landscape, that sounded… ominous. Although perhaps unsurprising; humans had always impacted the natural environment they occupied, especially since the shift to agriculture, but the rate of anthropogenic change had skyrocketed in the past century. It would be foolish to think that the dragon lines had somehow *not* been affected.

But something about Wei Wuxian’s tone… “In what way?”

Wei Wuxian huffed. “That there has been change is not surprising,” he said wryly, in an unknowing echo of Lan Wangji’s thoughts. “But this is…” His cheeks puffed in frustration, which was disconcertingly *cute*. “They are *weird*. The flow of qi is weak. And that makes the lines… muddled up.” He shook his head. “So. I do not *know*. But it would not surprise me if other things were muddled. Dying and being born again as well? Why not?”

There was a great deal to unpack in that statement, but… Lan Wangji blinked, suddenly sidetracked by a strange thought. “If cultivators deal with the souls of the dead… did you have proof of the cycle of reincarnation?”

Wei Wuxian blinked, his finger sketching characters against the side of the mug as he parsed through the unfamiliar word. Then he laughed brightly. “Ooo, philosophy fun!” Chuckling, he shook his head. “Proof? No. But that there is a difference between liberating a soul and eliminating? That much, yes, we knew. There is an after where souls go. Do they come back to live new lives?” He shrugged. “The point is that you would not remember if you did! So does it matter?” He drank the last of his hot chocolate, and then set the mug aside to give Lan Wangji a pointed stare. “And do not think I did not notice that you did not answer my question.”

…So he had not.

After a long moment, Wei Wuxian’s gaze softened. He shrugged. “If you do not want to say, you do not need to. I am curious only!”

And here he was, doing this *again* – letting the facade of academic distance and Wei Wuxian’s unwillingness to push too hard be an excuse for what was ultimately his own mulish recalcitrance in the face of an honest question. The man *didn’t know*.

Lan Wangji closed his computer and stood up. It was only when he'd reached the door to the veranda that he realized that Wei Wuxian hadn't followed. Turning, he found the man watching him from his seat on the floor, expression strangely guarded…

Oh. He thought Lan Wangji was leaving because he was angry.

"We should not talk here," he explained. "Wen Yuan would not eavesdrop by choice…"

But the walls were not the thickest. The boy knew the history, of course – better than many, as he had access to the resources to learn the parts usually omitted from the official versions taught in textbooks. But he was not aware of the more personal meaning of that history for Lan Wangji and his family. And he had already encountered enough cause for nightmares this evening.

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows, the shadow of uncertainty clearing and replaced by curiosity again. Setting his mug on the table, he climbed to his feet – pausing with an amused pout to tidy his papers off the floor at Lan Wangji's pointed look – and followed him out to the veranda.

Habit directed Lan Wangji towards the study… but, with uncharacteristic impulsiveness, he passed the door by and instead led the way to the master bedroom overlooking the garden. This was a private conversation; let it be done in a private space.

Of course, Wei Wuxian immediately perked up and began looking around with intense interest. Lan Wangji wondered what he thought. He had always been in the habit of keeping his personal space relatively spartan; it made for better sleep hygiene, particularly because he found the open, uncluttered space soothing.

Granted, the current extent of it was somewhat more extreme than his norm. After they had decided to move Wei Wuxian to the Jingshi, Lan Wangji had made a concerted effort to make sure that certain guilty pleasures were tucked out of sight. He was not ashamed of them, but the last thing he'd wanted was for Wei Wuxian to get the impression that Lan Wangji's assistance came with… expectations. Especially when he was unclear about how cultivators viewed certain relationships. The romances lined up on the shelf in the base of the nightstand were one thing; they were relatively innocent except for certain sections, and Wei Wuxian didn't know enough about modern genres to spot… certain tells. The *other* literature he occasionally indulged in…

That was not a conversation he was ready to have. *Especially* with Wei Wuxian. *Ever*.

Fortunately, he was already in the habit of tucking such things out of sight when Wen Yuan came to stay over – that was another conversation he had no interest in going through. It helped that, despite his open curiosity, Wei Wuxian apparently drew the line at openly snooping, at least so long as Lan Wangji was present. Instead, after wandering around the room briefly, studying everything with shameless interest but not actually *touching* anything, he turned to Lan Wangji's one true indulgence: the reading nook set into the circular window overlooking the veranda and garden that took up the lion's share of one wall.

Lan Wangji's breath caught for a moment as Wei Wuxian settled onto the seat, struck by the image. From here, the small garden lights were not actually visible – intentionally so, since that would not be conducive to proper sleeping arrangements. But their effect could be seen in the pale glow along the edges of branches and leaves and stones and the glimmering ripples on the surface of the pond of the pond. That silvery light cast sharp, ethereal highlights on the edges of Wei Wuxian's profile as he studied the scenery, casting the edges of his nose and cheek in high relief – even as the other side of his face was more diffusely lit by the softer, warmer glow of the bedside lamp that Lan Wangji had switched on when they'd entered.

A warm glow that seemed to settle into grey eyes as Wei Wuxian turned to look at him expectantly, reminding Lan Wangji that he had brought the man to his room for a reason.

Lan Wangji sat on the edge of his bed, as there were no actual seats in the room beyond the reading nook, which was far too small for both of them to sit in without a degree of intimacy *far* beyond what would be proper. Especially given the way his mind was wandering. "How much do you know of the Cultural Revolution?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian's cheeks puffed. "I know… not much, but not nothing," he said. "It was something that happened about fifty years ago?" He smiled sheepishly. "Our angry friend was not the only thing of that age I have met recently. So I looked in the history book. But… I do not know that I understood? There was a war between two factions to rule, one side won, there were *many* changes and some were not so good as planned. How shocking!" He rolled his eyes.

Lan Wangji had to bite back his own amusement at the droll tone. Given the rather extensive history of warlords and would-be dynasts instituting this or that sweeping reform by declaration that rarely had any lasting effect before the next coup turned things over again… of course it wouldn't seem so shocking.

"It is the next part I do not know I understood," Wei Wuxian admitted, frowning. "The leader who won… called for a second rebellion? That part was confusing."

Lan Wangji had to huff a little at that. He didn't blame the man for feeling baffled. "You are not wrong," he said. "After the Party came to power, the leader called for a complete change in the practice of farming and making goods. It… did not go well. There were famines. Many people died."

"Ah." Wei Wuxian's lip quirked in a humorless smile. "And so he said, *it was not I, there is another to be angry at!* Because anger is powerful and it gives power to the one who shows it an easy target and says *there is the enemy, to kill is to be right*."

Cynical, but not wrong. Although perhaps *cynical* was not the right word for it, but rather *realistic*. After all, many of the would-be emperors who'd risen and fallen had attempted to establish themselves by purging those they deemed – or could paint as – problematic. And given what Wei Wuxian had said about the fate of the survivors of the Wen clan… well.

"That… is not inaccurate," he said after a moment. "Following the failure of the Great Leap Forward, there was a call for a new revolution, but this time it was against anything and

anyone connected to… old ways of thinking. Of doing things."

"And old scores to settle, and anyone who said that perhaps this or that might be the wrong way to change things?" Wei Wuxian huffed. "So it was like the First Emperor's destroying books and scholars, then."

Lan Wangji blinked, taken aback by that comparison. And then taken aback by the fact that he had never considered the events of the Cultural Revolution in that light before. Oh, there were differences; the decree to destroy all but one copy of every book that might conceivably contain a justification for criticism of the Qin had been a top-down approach, not whipping up the frenzy of an angry populace eager for retribution against *something* and a sense of purpose. And the story of the first emperor ordering hundreds of scholars to be buried alive had no verification that it was not propaganda created to justify the takeover by the Han.

And yet there was something… perhaps not so much comforting as *grounding* in the thought that the horrors of the Cultural Revolution were not monstrous aberrations with no precedent, but rather an ongoing pattern of power and authority and control. Even if it was simultaneously terrifying for the implication that similar events could easily happen again.

Then again. They *already* had, hadn't they.

Wei Wuxian shook his head with a wry chuckle. "And so our angry friend burned the old part of the school? That at least explains his not liking you!" He tilted his head. "But, that is a thing that happened fifty years ago. You are not fifty years old! Unless…" His cheeks dimpled in a sudden, mischievous grin. "Did you also take a long nap in ice, Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji huffed internally. Only Wei Wuxian would take such an experience and make it something to laugh about! "I did not," he said, and enjoyed the sound of Wei Wuxian's laughter at his deadpan response. That brightness helped him voice the next words. "However, my parents lived in those times, and it… affected the choices they made."

Wei Wuxian turned to face him fully now, and eyes sharp and attentive, spine straight and his body *still* in a way that he rarely bothered with.

"The first years of the Cultural Revolution were the worst," Lan Wangji said, keeping the words distant, dispassionate. A history lesson, nothing more. "However, the policy was not actually reversed until the Chairman died. His successor sought an alternative way to modernize, particularly by sending students to other countries to learn new skills and ideas."

Wei Wuxian huffed softly. "I am guessing that the new skills and ideas they brought back were not only those that he had wanted," he noted.

"They were not," Lan Wangji confirmed, unsurprised that Wei Wuxian would have guessed as much. After all, he was the one who had drawn the analogy to Qin Shi Huangdi and his book bans. "The students brought back political ideas as well as scientific and technological knowledge." Now he had to pause, bracing himself to what came next. "It ultimately led to what is called the June Fourth Incident."

Wei Wuxian arched an eyebrow. “An *incident* that is known by a day, and nothing else? That does not sound like trouble at all.”

Lan Wangji had to breathe something that was not really a laugh at that. “The details of what happened are not clear,” he admitted. “It began when students gathered at Tiananmen Square to commemorate the life of a party official who was known as a reformer. But the gatherings escalated into more general protests and demonstrations about… many aspects of the economy and government.”

“And those who have power do not like to have their power questioned,” Wei Wuxian said quietly. Knowingly.

Lan Wangji nodded. “The protests were suppressed by the army,” he said, letting his eyes settle on the silvery ripples of water visible through the window behind Wei Wuxian. “No one knows how many died. Officially the death toll was several hundred. Unofficial estimates suggest that count is incorrect by an order of magnitude. What I do know is that my mother was one of them. My father did not participate, but he was arrested a week later on suspicion of encouraging the ideas behind the protests. We have heard nothing of or from him since. I was five then; my uncle raised me and my brother.”

Which was one reason why, for all his frustrations with Lan Qiren’s intellectual rigidity, his refusal to consider anything that could not be encapsulated in hard data and neutral numbers, Lan Wangji did *understand* it. Lan Qiren had seen Cloud Recesses burn in the Cultural Revolution as a child, and he had lost his brother in the aftermath of the June Fourth protests and subsequent crackdowns. He had learned all too well the dangers of any research that might be seen as *political*.

“Ah,” Wei Wuxian said, bracing himself with his hands as he leaned back in the windowseat. “And so the angry ghost bothered you. He was a part of a pattern.”

Lan Wangji nodded, grateful that Wei Wuxian had opted for a practical response rather than sympathetic platitudes. Although not surprised; Wei Wuxian had already admitted that he had lost his own parents when young, and he was no stranger to violence and the exercise of it in the service of political power.

“I was more surprised than troubled,” Lan Wangji admitted. “Although I should not have been. In hindsight, the events of the June Fourth incident alone would have resulted in many ghosts. And it was… not so unique in recent history.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled wryly. “War and famine and angry people pointed at easy targets. Your recent history probably has many, many ghosts like our angry friend tonight.”

Lan Wangji exhaled slowly. He had surmised as much, turning the encounter over in his mind. But to hear it put so matter-of-factly… “It will take a very long time to set things right,” he said.

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian laughed. “That depends on the things!” he countered cheerfully. “To set right the whole world? That would be a *very* long time. The world is big, we are small, and there are many who do not *want* things right, because wrong is easy and familiar.

Or there is no *right*, only *less wrong*." He shrugged. "Set right what you can; that is all anyone can do." He tapped his cheek. "And to speak of such things… what do you think? Tonight went well. Do you feel ready to try the dragon bones?"

Lan Wangji flexed his fingers slightly, remembering the feeling of energy running through muscle and bone. This morning, he had *not* felt ready; he had been apprehensive about attempting to exorcise even a small and harmless ghost…

But it had come surprisingly easily, the qi following patterns and pathways laid down by both his recent lessons and the decades of practice with the guqin underlying them. And while it would be a lie to say that he was not still apprehensive, there was a certain… eagerness, to reclaim this forgotten heritage.

"I accept your lead, as you are the one with experience," he said. "But… yes. If you believe I am ready."

Wei Wuxian clapped his hands briskly. "Excellent!" he said, beaming. "Then – if you still are not ready for sleep – perhaps we should discuss plans?"

Hands on his hips, Wei Wuxian studied the room, amused. Now that the stands and displays of the exhibit had been removed, it was obvious that his original suspicion had been correct: this was the summoning chamber of the Mingshi.

Not that he'd ever seen it in person, mind. He'd stayed well away from the restricted areas during his time as a guest disciple, because there was exploration and providing valuable mental enrichment to the lives of stodgy old fuddy-duddies, and then there was *stupidity*. But he'd worked in the Mingshi of Lotus Pier more than enough to recognize what he was seeing. The raised dais in the center to isolate the focus of the ritual physically as well as spiritually, the smaller ones in the cardinal directions for the participants to sit on.

Not to mention the vaulted ceiling, the reinforced pillars, and the heavy stonework of the walls. This was a room that was meant to contain things that very much did not want to be contained.

And it even came with a stodgy Lan elder!

"I hope you realize that we cannot simply empty the special exhibition room on a whim!" Lan Qiren huffed. "The special exhibits are a vital part of the museum and require careful planning and installation. We were fortunate that the historic medicine exhibit was already scheduled to come down this summer, we would not have been able to use this space otherwise. If such a space is needed in the future, we will need to schedule it in advance."

Wei Wuxian hummed – more to show that he was listening than in agreement. He was too busy laughing inside at the thought that the Lan clan that he had known would have been equally apoplectic over the thought of the Mingshi in general, and the summoning room specifically, being simply *open* for random people to waltz through!

Although, Lan Qiren wasn't wrong. If they were going to be doing this sort of thing on a regular basis – and if he was reading the implications of Lan Qiren's comments about other archives correctly, that seemed quite likely – then they were going to need to come up with a more permanent solution to managing space. Because there was a *reason* why access to the Mingshi's summoning room had been restricted, even when not actively in use.

Still. First things first. Stepping forward, he studied the dais for a long moment – and then clapped his hands sharply together into a seal.

Lan Qiren made a strangled sort of *urk* sound, grumbling going suddenly silent as pale light flared in curving lines and sigils following the perimeter of the central dais, stark and brilliant for a moment before settling down to a soft glow. He wasn't the only one staring, either – *everyone* in the room was gaping, even Wen Yuan.

Well. Everyone except Lan Wangji, who simply continued to tune his guqin with unflappable aplomb. Which was so very *him*!

Standing by the door, Nie Mingjue shook himself slightly and whistled. "Cool," he said appreciatively. "Although now that I think about it…" He nodded in the direction of the south wall. "How much of a lightshow should we be expecting? Because we might need to come up with a cover story."

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, tapping his chin as he studied the massive window that dominated the wall. And he had to admit that he was curious to know if that had been part of the original Mingshi, or something that had been added at some point over the centuries. Because on the one hand, it was a *giant window*. A massive break in the strong stone of the walls, and thus a potential weak point for whatever was contained within to attempt to escape through.

On the other hand, it was a south facing window, which meant plenty of warmth and strong light if needed. Not a bad thing for cleansings.

Shrugging, he turned his attention back to the wards on the dais, beginning to slowly pace around it as he inspected each piece carefully. That the wards had activated at all was a good sign, but that didn't necessarily mean they were *intact*. "That depends on how much the bones wish to fight cleansing," he admitted, crouching down to poke at the mortar sealing the stones together. Strong and solid, which meant it probably had been renewed at some point. Fortunately it didn't appear to have damaged the wards, but given the way materials had changed, he'd have to keep an eye on it for any odd reactions.

"How likely is it that the bones will fight it?" Wen Yuan asked nervously.

Glancing up from his inspection, Wei Wuxian smothered a laugh. Lan Qiren was still staring at the wards with the blank face of someone rapidly reevaluating a great many things, and he wasn't the only one looking distinctly disconcerted. Which seemed rather silly, since they'd discussed the plan rather exhaustively beforehand while waiting for the exhibit space to be available, but then again, things tended to look very different when faced with reality rather than abstracts!

Although Nie Huaisang, he noted with amusement, mostly looked like *gleeful*. And by the way he was holding his phone up and scampering around the edges of the room, he was taking many, *many* pictures.

Which technically was supposed to be Wen Yuan's job, but the boy's hands were slack on the forgotten camera as he watched the proceedings with a worried look, eyes jumping between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji.

He grinned at the boy. "How likely that they will fight? Very. It is resentful energy, of course it is tetchy! But enough to be a bother? It is unlikely."

After all, the challenge of the dragon bones was their age and the amount of resentment accumulated across the ages. Which did present its own complications; the lack of any core human element would make connecting to and cleansing the resentment at the heart of the accumulation much harder. But by the same token, without human rage and hate and grief and death to give that energy focus and drive and power, it lacked the *intensity* to be an active threat. Cleansing it would be more a matter of endurance more than power or skill.

And if power and skill *were* needed… well, he had those to spare!

Finishing his circuit of the primary containment wards, Wei Wuxian nodded to himself and broke the flow of qi, letting the light fade back into stone. Later, he'd want to do a more thorough inspection, but for the time being, the ward was stable and the lines of energy flowing properly, so it was functional. Nowhere near what it should be; the lack of upkeep had clearly worn away at it until there was almost nothing left. But useable, at least.

The wards embedded in the walls had not fared so well; he could sense them, but they weren't even intact enough to flare for a visual check. Not surprising; the wards had included sections for durability and longevity, but between a stone platform lying solidly on earth and stone walls standing up away from it… well, the wards would take on one better than the other! Besides, walls tended to have more problems with people trying to knock them down. It came with being a wall.

"Can they be repaired?" Lan Wangji asked, watching him.

Wei Wuxian huffed and shrugged. "Maybe. But things that have been fixed still remember having broken. It would probably be better to remove what is left and make new wards."

Lan Qiren frowned. "How long will this require?"

Wei Wuxian chuckled, waving a hand. "A while! I am not saying to do this tonight."

Uncharacteristically, the director hesitated. "If replacing them is not urgent… I would request that we wait to do so until the old wards have been properly recorded for our archives."

Wei Wuxian blinked.

Lan Qiren huffed impatiently at the startled looks he was receiving from more than a few directions. "I am not a fool. These wards are tools serving a functional purpose and should be

maintained as required for peak performance. However, they are also an important part of Cloud Recesses' history. Given what we have discovered about the loss of proper records regarding cultivation, we would be remiss if we did not document them thoroughly before making changes."

Well. That was an interesting point. Especially given…

Wei Wuxian gently poked at the fragment of the energy pattern in the wall in front of him again. Because he *knew* that pattern. He'd helped design it.

Which, on the one hand, was quite the compliment! The Lan had been no slouches when it came to ward work, after all. That his humble little scribbles had warranted such consideration as to be incorporated into the Mingshi? A man might swoon!

Except. The Lan had *not* been slouches at ward work. Granted, wards tended to be one of the things that people didn't change unless they had to – among other things, because they were usually set into the physical foundations of whatever they were warding. But it was generally good practice to renew them periodically, and such renewals usually incorporated new defenses and techniques, of necessity. And yet this was *his work*.

They had yet to figure out how or when cultivation had become a lost art. But that the wards had apparently *never* been updated after the restoration following the Sunshot Campaign…

That was ominous.

But! It was also a thousand years and more in the past, and not his problem tonight. The important part was that said thousand years of neglect had left the wards in the walls not only inactive, but nonfunctional.

"Will this change anything?" Wen Qing asked with a frown, standing by the entrance to the chamber and taking notes on her tablet. She was not participating in the cleansing, but she had asked to be present for the setup – both as a member of the "project," and as a student of medical cultivation.

"*If resentful energy is something that harms people, then I need to understand how it works and ways of preventing problems in the first place*," she'd argued.

In answer to her question. Wei Wuxian shook his head. "I did not know if any wards would still work, so I did not plan them," he admitted. "It is too bad, and it would have been better if they were okay, but we will not need them." Turning, he went to the bundle he'd left by the door and began unrolling the lure flags.

Well. Technically they weren't actually proper spirit attraction flags. For one thing, they weren't trying to *summon* anything!

More to the point, he'd spent a fascinating day with Wen Yuan and the inventions book and the boy's textbooks talking about electricity, magnetism and polarities, and it had given him *ideas*.

Granted, the concepts didn't translate completely; yin and yang energies weren't polarized the way magnets and electricity were. But the *principle* of push and pull, attraction and repulsion? He'd created the attraction talisman in the first place by reversing the flow of energy in wards meant to keep resentful energies *away* from something. This was just… taking the same principle to the next logical step.

Moving around the room, he began creating a perimeter of the modified flags. Once activated, they would create a circular pattern of push and pull that would force the energy accumulated within the bones into motion while keeping it contained within the chamber wards. The motion would separate the accumulated energy from the core, letting them cleanse the energy in stages rather than trying to do it all at once.

When he'd explained the initial idea to Lan Wangji, the man had compared it to something called a centrifuge. Which had led to a fascinating research tangent as he'd explained the concept of centrifugal force and how it could be applied to separate materials of subtly different substances… at which point Wei Wuxian had grabbed the concept and run with it!

Honestly, he was enjoying himself. There hadn't been much in the way of time or resources to spare when he'd been cleansing the Burial Mounds; he'd had plenty of theories, but he'd limited his tinkering out of necessity. And now he had fifteen hundred years of new ideas to play with – more, really, given that there was a whole *world* to poke at! Exploring how it would integrate with cultivation techniques was going to be *fun*!

First things first. Once the perimeter flags were placed, he returned to the center dais to plant the anchor flag, completing the formation. Stepping back, he double-checked the layout, then channeled a tiny bit of qi into it to check. He'd already tested the formation on a smaller scale, but it didn't hurt to be sure.

He grinned. The energy immediately began to cycle, and the flow was smooth and stable. Excellent!

Ending the qi flow, he glanced at Lan Wangji, confirming that his own preparations were finished, and then nodded to Lan Qiren. "I think we are ready."

"So, I meant to ask," Nie Mingjue said, as he and Wen Yuan began ferrying boxes into the room. "Is there a reason why you're doing the whole collection at once? I mean, I get that we can't tie up the temporary exhibit gallery for too long, but wouldn't it make more sense to break the job up into smaller pieces?"

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. "In theory, maybe. But they have been together so long, the energies have mixed. If we only cleanse some, the energy will just run away to the others." And likely break the wards in the process, which would be very awkward and probably *would* lead to the sort of dramatic light shows that would require a cover story. There tended to be consequences if you attempted a cleansing and failed.

Nie Huaisang snickered. "Spiritual quantum entanglements? Fun!"

Lan Qiren snorted. "I am shocked you even know the theory of quantum entanglement."

“Of course I don’t!” Nie Huaisang huffed. “I know the pop culture version.”

Mm-hmm. Sure. But, Wei Wuxian wouldn’t call him on it; he was well aware of the value of cultivating a reputation for frivolity. So instead he looked at Wen Yuan. “Quantum tanglement?” Hm. That didn’t *quite* sound like the term they’d used…

“It’s…” Wen Yuan hesitated as he set a box down, then made a face. “It’s a physics thing. A really *weird*, really complicated physics thing that’s probably not important for now?”

Ahhh. Yes, he remembered banging his head on some of the more esoteric manuscripts in the Jiang archives. Ow. Interesting ow sometimes, but still ow.

Lan Qiren, meanwhile, had dismissed Nie Huaisang to watch with gimlet eyes as the boxes were arranged on the dais. “You’re *certain* this will not affect the artifacts themselves?” he demanded. “They represent a priceless record of our deep past.”

Wei Wuxian smiled at him. “They will not be damaged,” he reassured the man. They’d already covered this in the preliminary discussions, but this *was* Lan Qiren’s life work; it made sense that he would worry.

In fact, it was entirely possible that the cleansing would *help*. One of the things that Wei Wuxian had learned, poking at the ways ordinary people dealt with ghosts and other problems when the sects were too busy to bother, was that the most ordinary person in the world still had a sense for when something was *dangerous*. Odds were good that, without realizing what they were doing, any scholars working with the bones had only ever done the bare minimum required for their research. Once the bones were safe to handle, they might well learn much more!

And Wen Yuan had just gotten a *look* on his face. The sort of look that meant he was desperately trying to figure out where a question stood on the scale of reasonable to ridiculous (because, like many teenage boys, he hadn’t realized that the correct answer was usually both!).

That was a look that usually led to *interesting* things. Amused, Wei Wuxian poked him, eyebrows raised in anticipation.

Wen Yuan coughed. “So, I’m, this is probably a stupid question, but… you said the *oracle bones* would be okay. But… what about the boxes and tags? They’re not going to go flying in a blast of energy or anything, are they?”

…ha?

“Why do you ask?” Wei Wuxian said, for once genuinely baffled.

Wen Yuan smiled sheepishly. “It’s just kind of a thing in xianxia movies, I guess. Someone rises as a fierce corpse or a ghost and suddenly their hair is twice as long and white and flying all over, or there’s a big blast of power and somehow it *just* knocks the guan off…”

Wei Wuxian blinked and tilted his head to the side. “So in xianxia stories, resentful energy does makeovers?” he asked, deeply amused now.

Wen Yuan made a face. “I *said* it was silly! But these are part of the official collection, if the artifacts get disassociated from their labels it’s going to be a big *mess*...” He paused. Blinked. “Wait. Where did you learn about *makeovers*?”

Wei Wuxian pointed shamelessly at Nie Huaisang.

Who eeped, hiding behind his phone from Wen Yuan’s dubious expression. “I mean, what else was I supposed to do?” he pleaded. “I had to explain how fashions work *somehow*!”

Wei Wuxian pressed his lips together to suppress a snicker. That was what Nie Huaisang *claimed*, but he was fairly sure that the man’s actual motive had been to see how much he could make Lan Wangji twitch. *Why* something as simple as how to stay abreast of recent fashions bothered Lan Wangji so much, he wasn’t sure; even Lan Yi had tracked the latest trends carefully, despite her status as both clan leader and mother, as well as her preference for the Lan tradition of conspicuous austerity, buffering her from the more cutthroat sartorial politics. Changing fashions were often indicative of changes in power dynamics, political or mercantile or both. You ignored them at your own peril.

Then again, he was getting the impression that scholars of this age faced the same expectations of performative aloofness as educated gentlemen in the style of the famous recluses from his time, demonstrating their moral virtue by withdrawing from the political world. Probably not a bad thing, either. From what Lan Wangji had and hadn’t said, another Cultural Revolution was not outside the realm of possibility.

In the meantime, the preparations were finished. Which meant… “Alright. Everyone who is not Lan Zhan, time for you to leave!”

“Awww, but!” Nie Huaisang abandoned the protection of his phone to pout woefully. It was a very good pout, Wei Wuxian admired his artistry. “Can’t we stay and watch?”

Wei Wuxian snorted. “Cleansing is not a spectator sport,” he said loftily, borrowing an entertaining turn of phrase he’d heard Wen Qing use more than once. Although he did have to admit that the great sects had certainly often treated it as such. But staged night hunts for the purposes of competition and bragging rights were one thing he would be perfectly happy to leave buried in the past! “Now shoo!”

Nie Huaisang looked like he was getting ready to complain more, when Nie Mingjue scruffed him by the collar and began pulling him towards the exit. “When the expert says go, then you go,” the big man said dryly over his brother’s protests. “Don’t argue with the bomb squad. We’ve got the video cameras up, you can watch the show *after*.”

“But we don’t even know if it will show up on camera!” Nie Huaisang wailed – and then twisted around in Nie Mingjue’s grip to look at Wen Yuan. “Do we?”

Following behind them calmly – because *he* was a good little well-behaved seedling! – Wen Yuan blinked. “I don’t actually know,” he admitted. “I’ve usually been thinking about other

things…"

As they left, Wen Qing turned to Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian. "I'm leaving," she assured them. "But given what you've said about the risks, I would rather wait outside to see for myself that everything has gone well."

Wei Wuxian nodded; that made sense, and he knew that Nie Mingjue would be standing guard as well, to keep them from being disturbed. To be honest, he suspected all of them would be staying – they were simply too curious! Even Lan Qiren lingered in the doorway for a long moment after Wen Qing left, before huffing impatiently and closing the door firmly behind him, leaving them to their work.

First things first. Wei Wuxian placed a talisman on the inner side of the door, sealing it against entry. Nothing like the doors of the Jiang Mingshi, so saturated with wards that they'd been almost sentient in their ability to assess a threat and judge who could pass in a given situation – but at least it was one more layer of protection against someone wandering in at exactly the wrong moment.

Then he turned and walked around to the northern summoning seat. Which felt a little odd, since as the Emperor's Seat it rightly should be held by a Lan, as this was their Mingshi. But of course, there *was* no senior Lan to lead the cleansing, and one of the reasons that the north seat was important was because it guarded against the demon gate of the northeast.

Besides. It meant he got a very pretty view of Lan Wangji, backlit by that big window. He'd definitely have to paint the scene when they got home!

Meeting level gold eyes, he grinned. "Ready?"

Lan Wangji inclined his head and set his hands over the strings of the guqin.

The first notes were soft and simple, but built slowly and steadily in volume and complexity. Immediately, the spiritual formation established by the flags began to respond, wisps of ambient energy drifting into a clockwise whirl. Lan Wangji would not be doing the main work of cleansing; he was still far from ready for that. But one strength of music was the way it created *motion*; his playing would keep the ward formation going, while Wei Wuxian handled the actual resentment.

Wei Wuxian just hoped Lan Wangji hadn't overestimated his endurance. The formation was designed to only require the smallest bit of spiritual energy, deliberately… but this was a process that would probably take several hours. *Physical* fatigue could well be their biggest obstacle.

Something to keep an eye on. For now… settling himself, Wei Wuxian breathed, and gestured.

The warding talismans attached to each box of artifacts fluttered away, and the resentment surged forth. Surged, and swirled away, pulled into the current of energy encircling the chamber.

Pursing his lips in concentration, Wei Wuxian strengthened the energy of the inner flag slightly, using the seal as a sifter of sorts to draw out the looser, lighter energies from the main mass.

The first layer were wispy little things, barely even worth calling *resentment* – just little curls and scraps of *but it shouldn't* that would have faded away easily on their own if they hadn't been pulled into the mass of resentment in the bones. Which was one of the many reasons why dealing with concentrations of energy like this was important! Like real human emotions, a mass of resentment could take things that normally *weren't* a problem and turn them into a very real problem indeed. A single dust mote might weigh nothing, but a mountain of dust could crush you all the same, and make a mess in the bargain!

A light brush of qi, and his clarity bell began chiming, the spiritually-tuned tone blending into Lan Wangji's playing and becoming part of it. A technique he'd learned as part of Yunmeng's festival rituals; where the Lan in their secluded compound had sought to isolate themselves from such small discontents of the world, the Jiang had been open to the ebb and flow of ordinary living, so they'd incorporated little cleansing rituals like this into everyday life at Lotus Pier.

Well. In principle, anyway.

More importantly, it was effective – the little wisps of twisted energy dissipated easily in the sound, once they had been separated from the mass at the center. Which was a good thing, because what entered the swirl next—

fear and fire and fury and not fair, how could they, why!

Wei Wuxian exhaled steadily, letting the surge pass by and through. This was going to be trickier.

Not ghosts. There might have been a few that had been caught in the pull of the bones originally, but if they had, any individual identity had long since been lost to the storm of betrayal and destruction and loss born when Cloud Recesses had burned in the Cultural Revolution.

Which, of course, was the awkwardness of the whole thing! With no spirits clinging to the desires of life, there weren't exactly a lot of options for liberation. Suppression didn't exactly fix it, just stalled the problem. And elimination…

Well. Technically it was *possible*, if you could get enough energy, and contain the bits and pieces in one place. But in general it tended to be like trying to clean up mud with a mallet: splatter everywhere!

Really, in that sense it was a lot like the Burial Mounds, formed out of the collective trauma of a single, horrific event. Just on a much, much smaller scale.

And he'd learned a few things in his time there. Bringing Chenqing up, he began to play.

First was an echo of the tumult, finding those notes of loss and terror and pain and awakening them to the present, stark and raw and immediate as if the fires were burning *now*…

Which most people would claim was utterly wrong. How could you ease resentment by *awakening* it? The very idea went against the natural order, etcetera etcetera, he could probably recite some of those complaints in his sleep.

The thing was, resentment was emotions that were *stuck in place*. To relieve them, you had to let them move again.

Which, granted, could be very tricky. This wasn't the war; there was nothing for that resentment to vent itself upon, other than the poor tangled-up ghost of the original arsonist, and *that* risked resentment and ghost getting tangled up in a feedback loop that he did *not* want to deal with. Which meant he needed to rouse the resentment, but not *agitate* it.

Because once it was in motion…

Shifting the song, Wei Wuxian painted an image in music and qi: Cloud Recesses by night, painted by patterns of light as it looked down at the brilliant spread of Caiyi below. By day, with students wandering the paths. The world righted again, the damage repaired, life returned.

With a ghost, this would be risky; resentment towards the living for having what the dead could not was a real thing. But this wasn't a *mind* so much as a memory given power, and for that…

Bit by bit, the knot of energy came apart and faded away.

Lowering Chenqing, Wei Wuxian took a moment to assess the situation. Lan Wangji's guqin playing remained steady and unfaltering now that the initial momentum had been set, keeping the spiritual centrifuge going around them. From the look of things, he'd settled into a light meditative state, perfect for maintaining a ward through an extended ritual. Only a light trance, though; noticing Wei Wuxian's pause, Lan Wangji met his gaze, and nodded. He was good to continue, then.

Wei Wuxian just hoped that the man's fingers wouldn't regret that. He couldn't be sure – it was hard to track time with so much of his attention focused on the resentful energy – but he was fairly certain that they had been at this for at least two hours.

He was keeping tabs on his own core as well. For the most part, the strain he'd noticed after waking from the ice had eased, with rest and food and meditation and the adventure of exploring this new world he'd found himself in. But he also hadn't exactly attempted anything particularly strenuous since then, either.

And now they'd come to the hard part, because with the dissolution of the mass of resentful energy born of the Cultural Revolution – and likely the subsequent violence as well – they had cleansed the last of the added energies that had accumulated since the dragon bones had been found and brought to Cloud Recesses.

Which meant that now they were faced with the dragon bones themselves, the energies merged over the centuries into something that was verging on becoming a kind of abyss.

And like an abyss, it was *angry*.

Resentment *surged* on the dais, unbidden and raging. The wards on the dais surged in response, rising up to trap the collected resentment of the bones within the circle as they'd been designed, but Wei Wuxian could feel the power hammering against them, *war and death and plague and flood and earthquake and…*

Oof. No wonder the ancients had struggled to cleanse the bones. And no wonder no one of the present day had realized their danger. Calamity, misfortune… for all that many people spoke of them as *evil*, the reality was that, outside of human matters like war, all to often they were things that simply *happened*. There was no malice in where and when a flood or earthquake struck… which meant there was no purpose to it, and thus no pattern to betray it.

But people *believed* it was malice, because it was so much easier to attribute tragedy to malice than accept that sometimes there *was* no reason or purpose behind terrible things that happened. And the sense of *wrongness*, of *this shouldn't have happened*? *That* didn't change.

And *that* was what was bound up in the bones.

Lan Wangji stepped up the pace of his playing without any instruction from Wei Wuxian. His expression was as still and calm as ever… but his eyes had widened ever so slightly and fixed on the space inside the wards.

Ah. He sees it now.

Wei Wuxian had to admit that he was *very* curious about what the video cameras Nie Mingjue had set up were showing. He knew that seeing resentful energy – and qi in general! – wasn't just a matter of the eyes; he himself was unusually sensitive to it, but all cultivators were better at it than common folk, and to some extent the ability could be trained, just as the ability to hear them could.

Of course, such abilities had drawbacks. It was a testament to Lan Wangji's discipline that he didn't flinch even as the accumulated energy slammed against the wards, making the room seem to shake with the memories of long-past earthquakes.

And that's enough of that. Raising Chenqing again, he began to play.

One of the things he had learned, fighting to survive in the depths of the Burial Mounds, and then later as he refined his techniques: often, resentment became stuck because a ghost would be trapped by one thing – a memory, a moment, an emotion – and lose sight of *everything* else. Call forward the *whole* of the ghost, reminding them of who they were beyond that one thing… and you were already halfway to getting them to liberate themselves.

Not exactly proper traditional cultivation, but what was the point of creating an alternative path if you didn't use it?

The dragon bones weren't ghosts. They didn't have lives to remember. But they'd had a *purpose* once: to forewarn of, protect against, and *cure* the same calamities that had left the echoes in the bones' essence.

Remember! Chenqing sang. *This is what you were.* This *was your purpose.*

Your enemy is there with you within the circle. Strike back! Avenge yourself!

I will help you.

The heart of the bones stirred.

And under any other circumstances he would have been *vibrating* with gleeful fascination, because the bones themselves were inert. But beneath the contamination of calamity, the old ritual *intent* lingered, like the almost-consciousness of the ancient doors of the Mingshi. And he desperately wanted to study them—

But the ancient spells had done their work a thousand years and more before even *his* time. They might not be human spirits, but they'd earned their rest just the same.

So, once the cloud of resentment had been cleared – from one side by their work, and from the other by the bones themselves – they shifted again. Lan Wangji stopped the song channeling power into the flag formation and segued into playing Rest instead, while Wei Wuxian set Chenqing aside to take up his clarity bell again. Using the simple, clear tone as guide and channel, he picked apart the energy patterns holding the old spells in place, letting them fade away at long last.

Although he *did* make careful note of those patterns, because Lan Qiren was right, there was no reason to just throw knowledge away! Granted, there were definitely some improvements needed – no reason to just leave old spells activated like that, now that they had ways to bind them off safely! But the sects had always scorned the use of divination as frivolous, which was part of what had made designing his compass such a *headache*, since he'd been working almost entirely from scratch. He really wanted to see what he could learn from these!

Then he sighed and flopped back onto his back, letting the clarity bell fall onto his still-crossed legs as the flow of qi cut off. "Well! That is that!"

Lan Wangji was too dignified to flop, of course. But out of the corner of his eye, Wei Wuxian saw the man's hands hesitate over the strings, as if he had to actively remind himself what to do with them now that the cleansing was done. "All is well, then?" he asked after a moment, uncharacteristically uncertain.

Which, fair! That had been *complicated*. "All done!" Wei Wuxian assured him, and kicked his legs up and over, straightening them as he went and pushing off with his hands to flip himself off the summoner's seat and upright again. And *oh* but the stretch felt good! He could sit for a full day in meditation and not miss a beat, but somehow sitting through a long ritual just *felt* different.

Catching the bell in his hand – he'd kicked it into the air with the acrobatics; efficiency! – he eyed Lan Wangji as he reattached it to his belt, and judiciously opted to take a little longer than was strictly *necessary* to take down the flags. By the time they were rolled and stowed, Lan Wangji had recovered his poise and returned his guqin to its case for transport, and was waiting patiently by the door for Wei Wuxian to remove the talisman sealing it.

Hm. By the angle of moonlight through the windows, it was quite late – late enough that even he would be happy to go home and fall into bed himself. But those were some *very* awake faces waiting for them in the museum lobby.

"Did it make a light show?" he asked, genuinely curious. He'd never really explored what ordinary people did and didn't perceive when it came to spiritual energy; his focus had mostly been on keeping them out of the hazard zone.

Nie Mingjue shook himself slightly, pale in a way that probably wasn't just due to the artificial lights. "I think I might have preferred the light show," he admitted, surprisingly candid. "That was *creepy*."

Huh. That was odd. Even towards the end, the wards should have… Ah. "Oops."

Really, did they *have* to look at him like that? Rude!

Huffing, Wei Wuxian tapped the wall. "The Mingshi had many, many, *many* wards," he explained. "Most of them, the protection wards, are still there. But there were secondary wards, that kept what was inside from troubling what was outside. Those…" He shrugged ruefully. "It is a place people *visit* now." The wards meant to keep the ambient yin qi from influencing people would have been in direct conflict with the new purpose of the space. It would have rapidly undermined the foundation of the wards.

Lan Qiren tugged at his beard, scowling thoughtfully. "That is something we will have to consider in the future," he muttered.

Wen Qing, meanwhile, was studying the two of them with sharp eyes. "Are either of you hurt?" she asked briskly.

Wei Wuxian grinned at her. "I am fine!" he told her. "It took a long time, but it was not dangerous." Could have been, maybe, but there'd been no complications, so!

"I am… ready to return home," Lan Wangji admitted.

Which, Wei Wuxian noted suspiciously, wasn't actually an answer. And thinking back, Lan Wangji had been moving rather gingerly as he'd packed his guqin…

Reaching out, he grabbed Lan Wangji's wrist and pulled the man's hand out from where it had been tucked behind his back. And winced, because those were some *nasty* blisters.

He scowled at the man. "You should have said something!" With a little shove, he pushed the suddenly mulish-looking Lan Wangji towards Wen Qing. "If a doctor is available, then you listen to her!"

Wen Qing grabbed Lan Wangji's hand in turn, pursing her lips as she took in the damage before pulling him over towards the bench where she'd placed her traveling kit.

Wen Yuan fidgeted nervously as they waited, then blurted, "So… you're done, then? The oracle bones are okay now?"

Wei Wuxian grinned and tweaked the boy's nose. "Yep!" he said. "They will always be a little *spooky*, probably. These things leave a mark! But no more resentful energy causing problems. They are safe for people to do things with them."

Lan Qiren sighed as Wen Yuan squeaked and then made a face. "That is good," he said. "I will see to returning them to the collections." He hesitated. "I would… also be interested in a report on their condition from a cultivation perspective. If you would be amenable," he added, stiffly.

"We will compile one," Lan Wangji said.

Wen Qing glared at him. "That had better have been a *royal* We," she said sternly as she finished wrapping bandages around his fingers. "I do not want to hear that you've been typing, writing, or doing *anything* that puts pressure on your fingertips for at least twenty-four hours. If you need to type or write, let Wen Yuan or Wei Wuxian do it. And no guqin practice for at least a week!"

Wei Wuxian eyed Lan Wangji's expression and leaned toward Wen Yuan. "We may have to hide his guqin."

Wen Yuan grinned. "I know some good spots," he said, radiating innocence.

Lan Wangji sighed, seemingly long-suffering, but Wei Wuxian was fairly certain that the man was actually amused as he stood up again. He glanced at Lan Qiren. "Will you require assistance with the artifact boxes?"

The older man huffed, making a dismissive gesture. "I am not so decrepit that I cannot carry a few properly packed boxes," he said dryly.

Nie Mingjue laughed when Wen Yuan's attempt to protest was interrupted by a jaw-cracking yawn. "And I'm no archivist, but I'm perfectly qualified to lift and carry things. I just need to give Meng Yao and Nie Zonghui a call to let them know they can stand down. Go put this poor kid to bed already!"

Wen Yuan looked like he wanted to protest, so Wei Wuxian chuckled and slung his arm over the boy's shoulders. "Come on, A'Yuan," he said cheerfully, steering him toward the door. "Do not argue with your elders!"

"You are perhaps not someone who should say such things," Lan Wangji said, straight-faced, as he held the door open for them.

Wei Wuxian gasped. "*Slander!*" he cried, deliberately stealing from Nie Huaisang's best theatrics. "I do not argue with my elders: who is more elder than I am?"

The cool night air was pleasant on his face as they left the Mingshi and began walking across the historic section of the campus, making for the path that would take them back to the Jingshi. It was good to be up and moving, listening to the hum of insects and feeling the light breeze. He'd always enjoyed the living quiet of the deep night, and especially after a difficult cleansing or night hunt. It was a good time to stop and *breathe*, without wondering who might be watching.

Although.

Keeping his arm draped around Wen Yuan's shoulders – as much to keep the sleepy teenager moving in the right direction as anything else – he reached out with his free hand to poke Lan Wangji. "So! That was a big cleansing. What did you think?"

As usual, Lan Wangji did not answer immediately, taking time to reflect before he spoke. "I am glad we were able to address the problem quickly and safely," he said at last.

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. "But?" he prompted.

"It was… more strenuous than I expected," Lan Wangji admitted. "I anticipated the physical demands for the most part, but I did not expect to feel so… drained."

Wei Wuxian nodded, unsurprised. "The golden core helps. It is energy for techniques, but other things too." The period when his had been inaccessible after Wen Zhuliu's last, half-deflected strike had made him *acutely* aware of how much cultivators unconsciously depended on that extra energy. When he'd been at Lotus Pier after the war, he'd made a point of occasionally sealing his core when training, so that he would know *exactly* what his options were if something like that happened again.

Although he hadn't done that in a while; the Burial Mounds were no place to deliberately limit your options, and he'd had plenty of other challenges to keep him busy! Something to think about for later.

"What other things?" Wen Yuan asked. "I mean, strength and speed, sure. Do you heal faster, too? Even if you don't deliberately meditate for it?"

Ah, the enthusiasm of youth! "Yep!" he said, and then grinned evilly, ruffling the boy's hair. "It helps with being taller, too!" He narrowed his eyes at Lan Wangji. "Although clearly some people do not need it."

Lan Wangji tilted his head, considering. "Human height is the result of multiple factors, including diet and childhood health. If a golden core improves healing and resistance to illness and malnutrition, then it would make sense that modern medicine and diet could have a similar effect."

Wen Yuan sighed heavily. "So basically you're saying I'm doomed to be short," he said woefully.

"You are still growing," Lan Wangji said gravely. "And Wen Ning is not short." He looked at Wei Wuxian. "I will admit that I would prefer to have more education before attempting such

a cleansing again." He hesitated. "It is not simply a matter of qi reserves. I believe I was able to *perceive* much of what was happening, but I did not understand what I perceived."

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. "Like what?" he asked, curious.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. "There were several points where it seemed like you were doing something very *different* from the methods you have taught me. Particularly towards the end."

Wei Wuxian rubbed his nose, chuckling ruefully. "Ah, you noticed that? I should have expected!" Really, it was a good thing Lan Wangji hadn't been part of the Gusu Lan in Wei Wuxian's time. It would have been much harder to get away with anything! Although he certainly would have enjoyed the challenge…

Lan Wangji waited patiently, while Wen Yuan craned his head around to look at Wei Wuxian with curious interest.

Wei Wuxian considered his options, and then mentally shrugged. Why not? It would be interesting to see what people in this time would think of guidao, without the distractions of *it is forbidden!* and *tradition!* skewing what they heard.

So. "Liberation, suppression, elimination. That is what cultivators were taught. And it is not a bad system! But it is… hm. Limited."

Lan Wangji nodded. "As with the ghost from the fire," he observed. "He cannot be liberated, because his wishes cannot be safely appeased. But suppression only delays the problem, and elimination…"

"Is rather harsh!" Wei Wuxian said with a wry smile. "That was the challenge with the bones. They were not human; they did not *want* anything. But they were too strong and too… not-one-piece to eliminate. Suppression was the only option. Except that suppression is not *fixing*, so it is not actually a solution." He shrugged. "During the war, I found another way."

Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan were both listening with attentive interest, which meant this was already going better than half the conversations he'd had on the topic in the past!

"The traditional methods are about what you do *to* spirits," Wei Wuxian continued. "But… you can also do *with* them." He smiled wryly. "Ghosts have wishes, but resentment is *feelings*. And sometimes, it is better to simply *use* those feelings. If you are angry because things are *not right*, then use that anger to *do* something!"

To his surprise, Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. "So it is still liberation – but liberation through catharsis, rather than calming."

Wei Wuxian blinked, tilting his head. "Catharsis?" he echoed.

Lan Wangji nodded. "It is a concept laid out by a philosopher from the Greek civilization of Europe: the release and purging of powerful and potentially dangerous emotions safely by allowing them to be acted out, by proxy or on an alternative target."

“Hm!” Wei Wuxian turned that over in his head, intrigued. It *was* a rather accurate description. Although… “*Safe* might be a little much! Angry dead can be *tetchy*.”

Not to mention that when it came to *alternative targets*... Yes, he’d certainly done that in plenty! But he’d also always been of the opinion that if someone had been murdered and wanted to make their opinion of the matter known personally to the murderer… Well, sometimes karma wasn’t so slow.

Wen Yuan suddenly snickered. “Oh man, I *am* tired…” he said. When Wei Wuxian blinked at him, he explained, “I just had this mental image of you sending an army of zombies after the bad guys like some bad horror movie.” He tilted his head. “Although… that would actually be pretty cool. Make the necromancer a *good* guy for once…”

Wei Wuxian didn’t laugh, but he did smile wryly. “Well. You are not *wrong*,” he admitted.

Wen Yuan gaped at him, tired rambling forgotten. “Wait. Are you *serious*?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “As I said. I learned the method during the war.”

And he was not going to apologize for doing what it took to end that war as quickly and decisively as possible. Not even what he’d done to Wang Liangjiao and Wen Chao. Yes, his tactics had been *particularly* gruesome in that case, he freely admitted it…

But he’d come out of the Burial Mounds exhausted and furious and terrified, with a golden core still inaccessible and no weapons or cultivation tools except a hand-carved flute and a new type of cultivation that was still mostly held together through guesswork, desperation, and every bit of *I will not die here!* he’d managed to scrape together, along with a sparse handful of half-formed techniques, more than a few of which he’d only come up with when he’d found Wen Chao’s base and realized that there was no way he was getting past all those soldiers and Wen Chao’s bodyguards without a lot of help, help that he couldn’t get without losing this chance to take out a major player in the war—

Well. He’d certainly gotten help, all right. Between them, Wen Chao and Wang Liangjiao and their forces had left more than a few restless dead… and the howling wrath of many, *many* ghosts.

It had certainly worked, even if he had been going on bluff and bared teeth towards the end. But after that, he’d stuck to corpses rather than ghosts; they were, ironically, less visceral in their violence. Not to mention that he hadn’t really gotten a chance to sit down and refine the reversed wards into the more controlled lure flags until *after* the war. Summoning every angry ghost and fierce corpse in the entire region to descend on his enemies was handy when he was trying to take out a protected target in a heavily fortified stronghold all on his own, but it would have been rough on any living allies. And bystanders.

Besides. There had been more than enough victims of the war to provide the forces needed. Although he’d done his best to limit the graverobbing to cases where the resentment was still seething under the ground. Not hard, since the Wens had a habit of throwing the dead into shallow graves with the bare minimum of ritual required to keep the corpses from demanding an accounting in person. Or just slapping a suppression ward on the grave and calling it good.

Not that the Sunshot Campaign had been much better about that sort of thing. Had he mentioned that war sucked?

Lan Wangji tilted his head thoughtfully. “Was it effective in liberating the spirits?”

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. “Yes, actually.” Not that anyone seemed to have made the connection – although, granted, it was difficult to notice when something *didn't* happen. But there'd been far less resentment lingering after the war than he'd expected, given the state of other, older battlefields.

“People must have been really impressed,” Wen Yuan said. “I mean, you *invented* a whole new set of techniques!”

Wei Wuxian snorted.

“Other cultivators did not approve,” Lan Wangji concluded.

“Resentful energy warps everything it touches,” Wei Wuxian recited dryly. “It offends the way the world should be. Liberation, suppression, elimination, that is the *only* way to do things. Unless something else is convenient! Then we will say yes now and insult you later.”

Wen Yuan scowled. “That's stupid!” he exclaimed. “I mean, it basically *is* liberation, right? It's just helping ghosts liberate themselves, rather than doing it to them.”

Wei Wuxian snickered. Oh, the *conniptions* those words would have set off among the old guard he'd known. “Ah, but that is the problem!” he said, raising a finger. “They did not *want* to see it, and they did not, because *everyone knows*.” He shook his head. “Liberation, suppression, elimination… it is not wrong. The problem is the way it… hm. It *shapes thinking*.”

He almost stopped there, not particularly interested in rehashing an old argument. But Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan were both listening intently, and how could he disappoint such a diligent audience?

“In that shape of thinking, resentful energy is *inconvenient*. It is a problem to get rid of. But resentful energy…” He sighed. “It is *pain*,” he said at last. “You cannot make pain not have happened. But you can *listen*. You can give things to do to let it out, or to move past.”

That had been one of the more interesting things he'd discovered – that sometimes what a ghost needed was simply to experience something *beyond* the final moments that had trapped them in this world. To *live* for a while, so to speak. Sometimes all it took was a few drinks with the ghosts of some pretty girls and a prank or two, really.

Lan Wangji hummed thoughtfully. “That is not unlike the approach taken by cognitive therapy. A way of helping people who suffer trauma to mitigate its effect on their minds,” he clarified.

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows, intrigued. Come to think of it, Wen Qing had said something similar, about new ways to treat heart demons. And in thinking about it, heart

demons and resentful energy were not all that dissimilar. Interesting!

And it was… nice, to have someone *listen* rather than simply rejecting the method out of hand as heretical! Although he should have guessed that Lan Yi's descendant would be so thoughtful!

"So… are you going to teach us how to do that?" Wen Yuan asked, with an expression that was the most *hilarious* mix of trepidation and pure teen boy glee. Ah, youth!

He grinned and ruffled the kid's hair. "Nope!"

Lan Wangji looked at him. "May I ask why not?" he asked. "From what you have said, it is a method that is both effective and compassionate."

The man said it so matter-of-factly that Wei Wuxian didn't even register the words for a moment, and almost tripped over his own feet when he did! "Lan Zhan!" he complained. "You are supposed to *warn* people before you say nice things!"

Lan Wangji's expression didn't so much as twitch. "Honesty is important."

Wei Wuxian made a face at the man, who was clearly enjoying this far too much! "Besides," he huffed. "That is actually the problem, sort of."

Wen Yuan had been biting back giggles, but at that he blinked. "Being effective is a problem?"

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly and let go of the boy's shoulders to ruffle his hair again. "No. The problem is that you and Lan Zhan… you two *care* so much. You want the world to be good, to be fair! And that makes guidao – my path – not good for you. People do not become ghosts because the world was fair. It is easy to forget good things, when you know about so much bad."

"But… *you* care!" Wen Yuan stared at him, eyes wide and worried.

Such a good seedling the boy was! Wei Wuxian laughed, clasping his hands behind his head. "I care! But after my parents died… Well! I learned that you cannot expect the world to be good or fair. Letting bad feelings stay in your mind is not good. It is important to care! But also to let go after."

Do not remember the good you do to others, or the bad done to you. He'd always lived by that; life was simply too busy to waste time seething over grudges and things that couldn't be changed. Far better to concentrate on doing what was right with the situation in front of you!

"That… makes sense," Lan Wangji said after a moment. "It can be an issue with emergency responders, physicians, and therapists; when you must deal constantly with people who have had terrible things happen to them, and particularly when they were inflicted by other human beings… that itself can be a source of trauma. People in those professions are often encouraged to seek counseling themselves."

Huh! That was interesting. And probably something that cultivators in general would benefit from—

Qi flared.

"A'Yuan. Lan Zhan. *Stop*."

The other two obeyed, pausing on the path behind his extended arm. "…Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji asked, voice low and careful.

Eyes narrowed, Wei Wuxian reached into his sleeve and pulled out the warning talisman, already crumbling away now that its purpose had been served. "The ward on the Jingshi is reacting."

Wen Yuan blanched. "Does that… mean what I think it does?"

Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly. "If you think it means that someone who does not intend good things is trying to get in, then yes."

Lan Wangji's lips thinned. "Jin Zixun?"

"Maybe." Wei Wuxian looked at them. "Wait here. I will go and look."

Lan Wangji frowned. "Is that wise?"

Wei Wuxian gave him an amused look. Really, who here had been through a war? Some respect, please!

Lan Wangji inclined his head slightly. "If it is not Jin Zixun… be careful. You are not familiar with modern weapons."

Alright, that was a fair point. "They will not see me," he promised.

Wen Yuan fumbled his phone out, almost dropping it in his haste before he deliberately stopped and breathed for a moment to steady his hands. "I'll call Nie Mingjue."

Ah, a good thought – and a good reminder that it wasn't just new weapons that he needed to keep in mind. Still – they would need to assess the situation before they decided how to respond, and he was the best suited to that task. Nodding to his companions, he slipped away from the path and ghosted through the trees.

Which was something he had quite a lot of practice doing! It never ceased to amuse him that people never seemed to consider how much sneaking was involved in the art of appearing dramatically out of nowhere, the better to terrify your enemies.

And while he might not know who exactly the men who were *also* skulking through the woods might be, he was fairly confident that they were not friends. Not with the way they were slowly and deliberately closing in on the Jingshi under the cover of the trees, fanned out to block any attempt to escape. He knew what an ambush in the making looked like. And while he might not know much about the weapons of this age – a gap in his education that

they would clearly need to do something about – he knew what men prepared for violence looked like.

Not to mention that they had brought some company with them.

The ghost appeared between one step and the next, *very* suddenly and right in his face. A girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old – just starting to take the shape of the woman she would have become, but still with the rangy, unfinished look of someone in the middle of a great deal of growing. She was dressed… not *unlike* A'Yuan did when he was not trying to look responsible and grown up, in a loose shirt with short sleeves and trousers. But hers were clearly worn thin and ragged, in a way that made it obvious that for all the improvements of this new age and its technology, some children still were left to make their way on the streets.

Intrigued, Wei Wuxian met her eyes – or, well, what was left of them. Those were some very ugly burns… acid, most likely, thrown directly into her eyes. Or more accurately, poured; the splash marks were wrong for throwing. Which meant that *someone* had done that very deliberately indeed. And from the dripping ichor, the burns had still been very fresh when she'd died.

"Hello, young friend," he said softly, a bare whisper of air that was more intent than sound. She was a ghost; *intent* was the most important. "I assume you know our uninvited guests?"

Her visible manifestation flickered in surprise, either at his calm reaction or to the fact that he'd addressed her directly. Making a face, she opened her mouth.

Ah. No tongue. That did rather limit her ability to communicate.

Well, there were ways around that, if it became important. For now… "I assume that you have some objections to these *fine, upstanding* gentlemen?"

She scowled, striking the ground with a strange, thin pole made of light, whippy material in red and white – although, he noted, it did not actually make a sound as it struck. Clearly, she did not want to draw their attention.

He smiled. "Would you like to help me make their day a very *bad* one?"

That was a *delightfully* evil smirk.

Nie Mingjue strode down the path at the ground-eating stride that he personally called the *Get Out Of My Way Or Else* walk, Nie Zonghui and Meng Yao flanking him on either side a half-step behind. All of them armed.

Hopefully, they wouldn't need it. Wen Yuan's follow-up call had said that the situation was under control, but urgent. Which could mean a lot of things…

Rounding the corner, he stopped short.

Wen Yuan was as pale as he'd been after Su Minshan had almost shot him that first day, clutching his phone like a lifeline in one hand while the other clutched at Lan Wangji's sleeve. The professor looked profoundly shaken, watching with white-rimmed eyes as Wei Wuxian efficiently moved among a handful of unconscious men, removing anything potentially dangerous by the expedient method of stripping each one down to his underwear.

That was a very large pile of military-grade hardwear. On men who were very clearly *not military*.

And given the pile of zip ties and tranq guns that was accumulating, they'd come here with a very clear intent.

"*Shit*," he breathed.

OMAKE:

"No! This cannot be!"

Lan Jingyi blinked. "Where did he learn that one?"

"Oh." Wen Yuan flushed. "I, um, tried to explain memes to him once."

"…*and*?!"

"And then I realized that the world was Not Ready for a Wei Wuxian armed with memes."

NOTES:

Zhongshan suit: in English this is often called a Mao suit.

I should note that we never get details about how Inquiry actually *works*, so the depiction here is me making up something that seems plausible based on what little we do know!

Also – as I've noted before, we get a weird perceptual illusion in MDZS because the Lan sect is actually the only one where we know anything about their specialties, how the sect functions, etc. As a result, it's easy to think they are the *only* ones doing such things. But just as the Jiang would logically have their own library, they would also have their own take on a Mingshi… and also their own way of communicating with ghosts, purifying energy, etc. We just never see them in action, beyond little hints – the clarity bells, the fact that they're strong swimmers. When it comes to cultivation techniques, *we only see what's needed to move the plot along*. And the plot actually has nothing to do with *cultivation*. Not even Wei Wuxian's cultivation.

(In fact, I suspect that the lack of details on Wei Wuxian's guidao is deliberate, to maintain the sleight of expectations created by the title calling him the grandmaster of *mo*dao.)

So it's no wonder there's a tendency in the fandom to treat the Lan as particularly skilled and knowledgeable… they're the only ones we know anything about!

…which leaves me with a lot of guesswork and hand waving, because cultivation actually *is* important to the plot here and I also have different problems moving my plot along…

Regarding the Lan as being aloof and inward-focused and considering their relationship to the rest of the world secondary: this is not so much a *headcanon* as it is a possible interpretation that is consistent with what we get from the text. We know that the wards are set up so no one gets in (or out!) without a token; this is not a place people can visit easily. The Lotus Pods extra makes it pretty clear that at fifteen, Lan Wangji had never before had any reason to actually go and interact with the ordinary people on his own, either. Not to mention the whole "you must obey all the rules *even if you do not know them*." Also consider the canon fact that Lan Wangji is stated to be unique in his "go where the chaos is" style. Note: Lan *Wangji*, not the Lan as a whole. The implication is that as a sect, the Lan also adhere to the "it's only important if someone dies" approach.

Plus, the Lan seem to be based on a Buddhist monastery model – the rules, the separation of the sexes, the fact secluded meditation seems to be their response to just about anything – and culturally, one of the biggest tensions of Buddhism coming to China was the whole "detachment from the world" (and the asceticism that ran against social obligations). All of which can be taken to support a reading of the sect as being detached, inaccessible, and generally isolationist. So I decided to go with that characterization here.

And in case you're wondering, Wei Wuxian is being a *little* gentler with Wen Yuan here than he is with the juniors in Yi City… because Wen Yuan legitimately *does not know* this, as opposed to walking into a dangerous situation when he should *darned well know better, what are the sects even teaching these kids?!*

(I actually laughed a bit writing this chapter when I realized that Wei Wuxian is treating Lan Wangji more as a junior when it comes to cultivation – granted, in this context, he has darn good reason to do so!)

Speaking of. I'm pretty sure that Lan Jingyi being scared of ghosts is 90% fanon and/or adaptation-related; the closest I can recall from the novel is him freaking out over A'Qing in Yi City, but he's hardly an exception there! Still, it's an amusing character beat, so I borrowed it.

Regarding not sleeping as a way to prevent PTSD: this is a theory, but not necessarily fact! But the basis of the argument is that sleep tends to encode and reinforce memory. By staying awake for a while after a traumatic event, you weaken the initial memory formation. That's the theory, anyway. Of course, skipping sleep has its own consequences!

And this chapter taps into the other big worldbuilding challenge of a story like this. It's not an issue for regular xianxia (or any type of fantasy), but once you get into a globalized setting like the modern day, or even cross-cultural contact? Then either you need an explanation for

why the supernatural aspects are restricted to one area, or you have to treat it as a phenomenon that *all* cultures have had to handle in one way or another. (My personal headcanon, though I don't go here in the story itself: cultivation never became a thing in other cultures because people who made headway in it tended to interpret it as a matter of special heritage or divine favor, rather than as a technique that could be trained.)

Resentful energy makeovers: this is one of those silly tropes that stood out in the first episode of the donghua. Someone dies and rises as a fierce corpse, suddenly their hair has greyed, and it's flying loose despite being neatly coiffed just moments earlier. I just had to get in a giggle about that!

An interesting philosophical note: I listen to lecture series during my commute, and one recent series focused on how various religions and philosophies have explained evil over the centuries. One thing that stood out to me was how often *natural disasters* ended up filed under "evil." Now, granted, I suspect some of that is due to the problem of theodicy – which is the logical conundrum faced by monotheistic religions that posit an omnipotent and benevolent God in dealing with the fact that bad things happen to good people. But I personally think a lot of it has to do with the fact that many people can't cope with the lack of control that comes with accepting that sometimes, awful stuff just *happens*. (Which isn't necessarily bad, because on the other end of the spectrum, sometimes awful things don't *just* happen. As noted in a different lecture series on East Asian civilizations, the idea that natural disaster is a sign of corruption in government isn't wholly unfounded. Earthquakes are out of anyone's control, but a flood might well be an indication that the funds marked for maintaining the flood walls aren't going where they should!)

(Not that the philosophies of evil lecturer got into that. Like most philosophy series, it was frustratingly Western oriented. I would have been interested in exploring concepts of evil in other traditions!)

But since I was working with the historical pattern of oracle bones being spiritually tainted after use, I ended up playing around with that…

(For the curious, I'm partial to Terry Pratchett's definition of evil: "treating people like things." Which means, yes, there's a lot out there in the world that isn't evil, it just sucks.)

And speaking of lecture series, one of my favorites is on how human perception works. It's *really* interesting to explore how our senses feed into each other: if someone says "ba" but it's dubbed onto video of them saying "ga," *you will hear them say "da."* So if we posit that qi has its own sensory system, then yes – logically that sense is also going to affect your perception in your other senses.

…if you haven't figured out by now that I am a gleeful geek, clearly you haven't paid attention!

Regarding guidao: as I've mentioned before, I don't see any real evidence in the novel that guidao is inherently harmful to physical health, sanity, or soul. The narrative states that it is *once*… in a discussion of why Mo Xuanyu would have turned to those techniques, from the POV of Jin Ling; all the other references are from Lan Wangji, who is *biased*. And that narrative reference is very early in the book, when the story is still setting up expectations

that will be deconstructed later. Meaning it's yet another case of *everyone knows*. Everything we see happen to Wei Wuxian is consistent with someone who's been through terrible things, then under a great deal of stress and betrayed on nearly every side. Add in the secret he's keeping, and yeah. No need for supernatural corruption. Lan Wangji actually states the heart of the matter when the juniors are surprised by Wei Wuxian's collapse following the Second Siege: he's *human*, and all humans have limits. And I don't think it's an accident that we get that line right after the flashback that confirms that Wei Wuxian was never the villain he was said to be.

While I'm at it: note also that, contrary to what you see in fandom, novel canon implies – I would say it's flat-out canon – that Clarity (or Sound of Lucidity, although that seems to be an inconsistent translation issue in ExR rather than an actual difference) *has no effect on him*. Which to me says that there's nothing that it can act *on*.

As I noted above, how guidao *works* is never really clarified. But going off what we see Wei Wuxian do, I find it striking that he never seems to manipulate resentful energy *itself*; he only seems to work with it in the form of actual ghosts or corpses, often through a medium like a talisman or music. So my headcanon is that the reason "everyone knows" that resentful energy corrupts is that people tried to treat it *like spiritual energy*, cultivating it inside themselves. But in fact, Wei Wuxian uses it *externally* by using his social and emotional savvy to convince the dead to work with him. Which makes it a technique that he would be uniquely suited to using, given his temperament, people skills, and experience navigating temperamental people. It also explains why the user's emotions seem to have a strong effect on it: the urgency Wei Wuxian put into his music on Mount Dafan riled Wen Ning to a more violent state than he intended, and his panic at seeing Jiang Yanli interfered with his control in Nightless City.

(Note: yes, on occasion the novel says that his eyes turn red. According to a meta writer who is *way* better informed on Chinese literature than I am, this means bloodshot, not glowing, and is a trope in Chinese writing to indicate strong emotions, rather like the trope in Japanese anime of using nosebleeds to indicate arousal.)

That said, no cultivation method is entirely safe; qi deviation is a danger *all* "normal" cultivators face. Given that Wei Wuxian's cultivation keeps circling back to empathy and compassion for the dead? I suspect that there's no issue of *corruption* or *loss of control*. Instead, the risks are similar to what disaster journalists, police tracking serial killers, and counselors working with trauma victims face: compassion fatigue, depression, and second-hand trauma – because ghosts are people who had terrible things happen to them, and it's generally other people who did it.

Which, to me, is the other reason Wei Wuxian is so well-suited to guidao – his upbeat, don't-dwell-on-the-bad mentality is perfectly suited to guidao. It's worth noting that the *happiest* we see him since the fall of Lotus Pier is when he's *living in the Burial Mounds settlement*… where he has a cute kid to babysit, a co-leader who doesn't have subscription-level Issues he needs to navigate, and eventually a supportive and friendly community. His breakdown at Nightless City came as the result of a back-to-back string of tragedies and betrayals, leading to him being pushed into a corner by people who've already decided that *they do not care what is right*.

Regarding Lan Wangji using musical cultivation despite not having a core… this is mostly a handwave, but it does seem to be that the core is a way to stockpile power, rather than inherently *enabling* the use of techniques. Odds are good that a lot of techniques require more power than can possibly be sustained without a core, but at least some would be more an issue of someone without a core needing to be very deliberate with their use of energy. But mostly I'm using it because forming a core is not easy and not fast, but the cleansing is way more interesting with Lan Wangji as a participant!

And since I know this is likely to come up… Wei Wuxian is *not* in the habit of ignoring medical advice. Insisting on treating Lan Wangji first in the Xuanwu's cave is good sense: Lan Wangji's injuries impede his ability to move, Wei Wuxian's don't. When he tells Lan Wangji that the curse mark he transferred from Jin Ling won't be a problem… lo and behold, he's absolutely correct. As for the guidao… as noted previously, Lan Wangji never frames that as help, and at least by my read, *there's no need for treatment*.

And now, if you like, here I'm going to *really* go off into the speculative weeds, because I honestly doubt that this is the reading intended by MXTX. But just for funsies…

Regarding how Wei Wuxian kills Wen Chao: fandom generally agrees that this is a case of his lowest point due to trauma and wanting revenge, and I can definitely see *why* people think that.

But. Is it *really*?

First: *Wei Wuxian is not actually acting out of character*. People tend to forget that Wen Ning only survived that encounter outside Lotus Pier because Wei Wuxian needed to question him for Jiang Cheng's whereabouts! Canon, Wei Wuxian is fully capable of being a cold, hard pragmatist when he has to, and that *explicitly* predates the Burial Mounds: the reader is present for the moment where Wei Wuxian discovers that he *can* be that ruthless, when he's trying to save Jiang Cheng – *before* the core transfer. That's the moment where we see one of his core character traits emerge: Wei Wuxian's response to human malice.

Quote: "Xue Yang needs to die." And then walking out to make sure it happens *personally*.

We see it in Qiongqi Pass. We see it at Nightless City. He knows that Wen Chao and Wang Liangjiao are the sorts of people who will prioritize hurting other people *even when there's a legendary monster attacking*… and they are high-ranking officials of an enemy sect who are authority figures in a war. And Wen Zhuliu is a *serious threat*.

Not to mention, if he wants to keep the situation with his core secret? He *needs* to ensure that Wen Zhuliu and Wen Chao won't talk. They (or at least Wen Zhuliu) *know* he didn't have his core by the time they caught him.

He is going to take them out. By any means necessary.

So ask yourself: what means does he have *available*?

Fandom often seems to assume that Wei Wuxian came out of the Burial Mounds with an army of undead at his beck and call. However, we only ever *see* two fierce corpses working with him in this sequence: the child and the woman. And consider this: the very first arc in the Mo household establishes that he generally can only command the dead if he either has worked with a particular corpse enough for it to be accustomed to him, or if the deceased have a goal that corresponds with what he wants done. (With the possibility that the Yin Hu Fu allows him to circumvent this – we never actually *see* him use it, so that's a big question mark. And he didn't have it when he came out of the Burial Mounds the first time, so it's not relevant here.)

The novel also establishes that talismans require, at bare minimum, something to write *on* and something to write *with*; none of this glowing lines in the air or channeling power through leaves. Given how long it takes him to get his hands on talisman materials at the start of the novel and the fact that running out of talismans on Mount Dafan is what forces him to resort to using guidao openly, he also can't use just *anything* for them.

So when Wei Wuxian goes after Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu? He has no sword, no tools outside Chenqing, and only what dead he can rouse *without* having worked with them. And even assuming he knew about the Sunshot Campaign when he started, the odds of getting to them, convincing them to help, and getting *back* to successfully take Wen Chao out are slim.

No wonder he opts to sabotage the wards and summon ghosts to them; given the massacre at Lotus Pier, there'd be plenty available, and given Wen Chao's proclivities they wouldn't be the only ones. Side note: also established in the Mo Manor arc is the fact that the summoning flags have to be *carefully* calibrated so that they don't pull from too far away. But what he would have used on the Wen strongholds would *not* have been calibrated… because odds are very good that he came up with the modification *on the spot*. Again: no talismans to experiment with in the Burial Mounds. (And in the Burial Mounds, his priority would have been "go away," not "come here"!) Also note that he doesn't seem to *directly* control the dead; rather than puppeteering them, he just points them in a direction and either riles or calms them. The extent of his direct control seems to be "target/not target" – and even that can be iffy if the dead are angry enough.

There's also the fact that he seems to have spent a lot of time fine-tuning his techniques. Which, to me, means that the guidao he's using in the Wen Chao scene, to use an analogy from the Marvel Avengers franchise, is a lot like the first armor that Tony Stark built in the cave: rough, clunky, ad hoc, and meant to get the job *done*, not finesse.

So he sets the ghosts loose, they drive a lot of the Wen mad, and he goes after Wang Liangjiao and Wen Chao with the two fierce corpse allies he has: the woman and the child.

And even then, he still has to deal with Wen Zhuliu. When he doesn't even have a core. Which means the best tactic available is to *psyche the guy out*… and to make sure Wen Chao can't help, because an idiot with a sword is still someone who can stab you when all your concentration is on fighting a dangerous opponent.

(For that matter, note that he never claims that *he* made Wen Chao bite his fingers off. It's entirely possible that was a stress response, or the effect of the ghosts. There's an argument to

be made that in fact, Wen Chao doing that is what *allowed* Wei Wuxian to finally close in for the kill, since it effectively took Wen Chao out of the fight.)

In short: he *looks* like he's deliberately dragging things out for the sake of vindictiveness to torment Wen Chao. He's not – or at least that's not his primary goal. He's fighting using psychological warfare, guerilla tactics and *bald-faced bluff*. And one hell of a lot of spite.

Which… is very in-character, really.

In addition, bear in mind that we never get Wei Wuxian's point of view in this scene. We don't actually know *what* his intended endgame was. He might have planned to just shove a dagger in Wen Chao's heart and be done with it. (Personally, I think that he probably intended to just let the two fierce corpses loose on the guy. It's safe to assume they had personal grudges against Wen Chao, given what we know of how guidao works, and Wei Wuan has an established pattern of letting the dead avenge themselves; we see it at Mo Manor, at Qiongqi Pass, and at the temple.) But from the instant Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji show up, *he's giving a performance*. For an audience of one. And that one is not Lan Wangji.

He *cannot* let Jiang Cheng know about his core.

And that means he can't explain that he's using this terrifying new technique for lack of other options. He needs an alternative explanation. So he leans into the persona of the cold, ruthless avenger. And Jiang Cheng buys it hook, line and sinker, *because that's what Jiang Cheng would do*.

As I said, I do absolutely get the whole focused-on-revenge, at-his-lowest-point reading. But I also think it's interesting to instead step back and consider that scene through the perspective that, at that point in the story, the plot is still tricking you into thinking that you're reading a classic Blackened Protagonist narrative. And then ask yourself, "So what *else* could actually be going on…?"

Chapter 16: Countermeasures

Chapter Summary

The project doesn't have room to wait any more.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for references to canon-level body horror and harm to a child (including death), because A'Qing means Yi City… and Xue Yang.

He didn't care *what* the poets said. Whether rising obscenely early or not yet having gone to bed, *dawn* was something no sane human being should be seeing.

Grimly, Nie Huaisang picked up the mug his brother had pushed at him and slugged it down as fast as he could, trying not to actually taste it. He liked coffee as much as anyone, but his brother had never broken the military habit of making tastebud-traumatizing sludge that was more adrenaline in a mug than actual *coffee*.

Unfortunately, he had the feeling he was going to need that today.

Lan Qiren was fuming, which would have been funny under other circumstances. "Who are those men and how did they get in?!" he demanded.

Meng Yao winced. "We're looking into how they got in," he assured the man. "However…"

"Cloud Recesses is a university, not a fortress," Lan Wangji said flatly. "Access is not so controlled."

Wen Qing's mouth was a thin, grim line. And by the way Lan Wangji's eyes blazed behind a resting murder face that had gotten even stonier than normal, he was seriously contemplating violence as soon as he could find a target. Not that Nie Huaisang blamed either of them. Both were hovering behind Wen Yuan, who'd fallen more than sat on one of the two visitor chairs in Nie Mingjue's relatively small office. The kid's eyes were huge against a paper-pale face, and even from here Nie Huaisang could tell that Wen Yuan's hands were shaking.

Ironically, Wei Wuxian was probably the calmest person in the room, listening with attentive interest. But, of course, *he* was actually used to this sort of thing. And had been the one to take the intruders down in the first place.

It was almost enough to make Nie Huaisang laugh. All his pushing to get Wei Wuxian included in the project meetings, and all it took was an attack by heavily armed men in the middle of the night.

No, Nie Huaisang was *not* taking this calmly *at all* and he was happy to admit it!

"As for who they are?" Nie Mingjue grimaced. "Long story short, *bad news*." Turning his monitor around to face them, he crooked a finger in silent invitation.

Morbid curiosity had Nie Huaisang leaning in to look, even though he knew perfectly well that he was *not* going to like what he saw.

"That's a Wanted listing, isn't it," Nie Zonghui said, and yes, Nie Huaisang officially Did Not Like This!

"I get regular updates from the national databases," Nie Mingjue confirmed. "Part of the job. More than one of our uninvited guests are listed, but *this* guy is the nastiest."

Xue Yang, the name read. Nie Huaisang had to swallow then, because the listing included a *known kill count*. And…

"Known affiliation with organized crime groups. Lovely," Wen Qing said blackly.

Lan Qiren spluttered, even as he paled under his beard. "What are that sort doing here on campus?!" he demanded.

"There's a massive black market in antiquities," Meng Yao said, hands twitching as if he'd like to wring them and was fighting the impulse down by will alone. "But… Sir. I've seen that man before. At the Caiyi police station. *In uniform*."

Nie Mingjue exhaled heavily. "Well. That probably explains Su Minshan's disappearance… and why they were carrying *these*." A sharp gesture took in the array of hardware spread across his desk.

Which. Well. Yes. There wasn't much reason for their intruders to be carrying the tools for a kidnapping unless they knew there was *someone to kidnap*.

Face grim, Wen Qing picked up one of the tranquilizer darts, tipping it back and forth and studying the contents. "It's worse than you think," she said.

Lan Qiren's eyes immediately cut over to her. "Worse?" he barked.

Wen Qing set the dart down. "Contrary to popular belief, tranquilizers aren't a good way to disable someone. There's too much risk of life-threatening side effects, and the dosage needs to be precisely calculated to an individual's body weight and BMI."

Well, that was just lovely. Especially given… "They were all carrying three different dosages, weren't they?" Each one neatly marked.

Wen Qing's face could almost pass for calm, if not for the eyes blazing with a fury that made Lan Wangji's look mild. "I can't be sure without knowing the specific drugs in these. But at an estimate, they appear to be the correct dosages for Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji… and Wen Yuan."

Bother. He'd thought one of those darts looked smaller than the others. Nie Huaisang tapped his phone against his nose, contemplating richly deserved mayhem.

Especially when the kid's eyes somehow, impossibly, got even wider. "Wait. They were going after me? Specifically?!"

"Probably for leverage," Meng Yao said. "If they knew Wei Wuxian was alive… they probably had some idea what he's capable of."

"Which is why they were at the Jingshi," Nie Mingjue said flatly. "They weren't just after information. They were going to grab Wen Yuan and Lan Wangji first."

Wen Yuan as a hostage, and Lan Wangji as the person who would know where to find Wei Wuxian. Nie Huaisang had to admit, tactically speaking it was certainly efficient.

But… "Wait, that doesn't make sense!" he protested. "Even if they did hear about Wei Wuxian – well, that part is easy, Su Minshan probably sang like a canary when he realized the sort of people he was dealing with." Which didn't explain why they'd spring the idiot in the first place, but then again, antiquities market. *Anything* related to Yiling Laozu would sell for a very pretty sum.

Which struck him personally as nonsensical. Why spend so much on something you couldn't even show off? But, well, there were always the ones who got an ego trip out of just the *having*.

"But hiring those guys and sending them? Wouldn't that be *expensive*?" he pressed. "Why would someone do that all on the word of a guy who sounds crazy?"

Wei Wuxian hummed, tapping his cheek thoughtfully. "I have a thought? One of them, he said something about a video of bullet-catching."

"…Well, damn," Nie Mingjue said with feeling, after a long moment of unsettled silence as they absorbed the implications. "That would do it."

Lan Qiren whirled on him. "You said the video from the lab was made inaccessible!"

Nie Mingjue nodded, looking at Meng Yao.

The officer bit at his lower lip for a moment. "I pulled the video. No one should have been able to access it without physical access to the offline server. So unless they managed to get a hold of it before I scrubbed the data from the main system, the only time we haven't had complete physical control over access would be…" He looked at Nie Huaisang and winced apologetically.

Nie Huaisang huffed, flicking at the charms on his phone case. “Gao Huiqing never had a chance to copy the video,” he said confidently. And he took precautions with his data!

“Still…” Meng Yao started, before he was interrupted by a pointedly cleared throat.

“Gentlemen,” Wen Qing said. “You are forgetting an important detail.” She tapped the table next to the tranquilizer darts pointedly. “Those men came for Wei Wuxian. They had a tranquilizer prepared for him, and I don’t think they would risk that unless they knew the necessary dosage. Which means *someone accessed my files*. Files that I have been keeping on a computer with all network access not only disabled, but physically removed.”

“Which means they must have an agent on campus,” Nie Zonghui sighed.

“It’s looking like it.” Nie Mingjue ran a hand through his hair, huffing in frustration. “Dammit! This was enough of a mess when it was Su Minshan and his contraband bullets. We are *not* equipped to deal with organized crime!”

Especially not when it looked like *someone* had thrown real money at this, Nie Huaisang agreed silently. That suggested a backer with deep pockets… and deep pockets tended to go hand in hand with power and influence.

Lan Qiren was still fuming. “I want those men *off* my campus!” he snapped.

“Gladly!” Nie Mingjue snapped back, and oof, Dage was getting *snarly*. Not that Nie Huaisang blamed him. Nie Mingjue’s military background aside, he ran *campus security*, not a law-keeping force. Right now they were relying on Wei Wuxian’s weird cultivator pressure point thing to keep the would-be kidnappers down, because the campus didn’t even have a real lockup, let alone the sort of high-security cell someone like Xue Yang warranted! Because anyone who’d actually gone that far was supposed to be handed over to the police.

Except…

“Except where do I *send* them?!” Nie Mingjue continued sharply. “Because in case you forgot, Xue Yang was *at* the station in Caiyi and Su Minshan already walked out of there the minute we looked away!” He drew in a deep breath and visibly forced himself to calm. “Director. Right now, it looks dangerously like the Caiyi police force is compromised. Even if they aren’t, a municipal police force isn’t much better equipped to deal with this sort of thing than we are. We need help here.”

The lamp on his desk turned off. And then on again.

Most of them just blinked – but Wen Yuan made a startled sound, turning to look at Wei Wuxian. “Was that…?”

“Ah!” Wei Wuxian grinned. “I think there is a person who has a thing to say.”

For a moment, Nie Huaisang’s mind was blank. Then he remembered his tropes and almost squeaked. “A ghost?” he asked, trying not to sound *too* enthusiastic. Because, well, ghosts shouldn’t be a good thing…

But Lan Wangji wouldn't let him hang out to watch the training or beg demonstrations, and they'd even kicked him out when they cleansed the oracle bones! He was putting up with grumpy Lan academics and conspiracy theories and now *organized crime*, the least they could do was give him some awesome to watch!

Okay, yes, he'd already been meddling with the conspiracy theories because the chaos was glorious, but it was the *principle* of the matter.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, then looked at Lan Qiren and Wen Yuan. "I will warn that it is not pretty." His lips quirked for a second, as if at something only he could hear, and he tilted his head. "Or rather, *she* was pretty! But the way she died was not so good."

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, but nodded stiffly. "Since it seems we are in need of more information," he grumbled.

Wei Wuxian grinned, and then held out a hand, humming to himself.

And then there was another person in the room with them and he might have mentioned she was just a kid—

Because it was really, really obvious what he'd meant by saying that the way she'd died was *not so good*.

"Our friend here was following the one called Xue Yang," Wei Wuxian explained, politely ignoring the soft exclamations and curses as they reacted to the girl's sudden appearance and… well, *appearance*. "She was very helpful in stopping them!"

Nie Mingjue was paler than Nie Huaisang could ever remember his brother getting, outside that one time that they did not speak of when Nie Huaisang had very nearly tumbled off the apartment balcony trying to get a closer look at a bird. But he leaned forward intently. "You think she can… wait." He visibly braced himself, then looked at the girl's ghost directly. "Can *you* tell us anything about who sent them? Who they're working with?"

The girl *smirked* at him – and then opened her mouth, impossibly wide, which was *already* gruesome enough even before it sank in that she *didn't have a tongue, the stump was bleeding ghostly ichor…*!

"Okay, you're playing that up on purpose!" Nie Huaisang complained, and somehow he wasn't surprised when she grinned impishly, face back to normal proportions.

"I assume that means she cannot speak," Lan Wangji said, face stony. "Do you have an alternative means to communicate?"

Wei Wuxian nodded. "She cannot tell, but I can *see*. But it can be a tricky technique, so it is better to have a helping person!" Reaching down, he detached the small silver ball with its purple tassel from his belt and tossed it to Wen Yuan. "So! Think you want to try?"

Catching it, Wen Yuan visibly gulped, then rallied himself. "What do I need to do?"

"Ring it!" Wei Wuxian grinned. "When it is time for me to finish."

Wait, the little bauble was a bell? “But it doesn’t make noise,” Nie Huaisang pointed out.

“Of course not!” The statement was accompanied by a mock-haughty sniff. “It is a cultivation tool. It rings when you *want* it to ring.”

“And how do we know when you’re ready to finish?” Wen Qing asked pointedly. “What exactly will you be doing?”

“Ah! Apologies. It is… hmmm.” Wei Wuxian frowned slightly. “It is a way to share a memory. If you do it correctly, it is not dangerous. But it can be… hm. Tricky to stop when the sharing is done. As for how to know…” He chuckled, reaching over to ruffle Wen Yuan’s hair. “You are learning to feel qi – you will know! But if you are not sure… One ke – ah, fifteen minutes. That should be enough.” He tapped his cheek playfully. “Or if I am screaming. Screaming is a good sign to stop what you are doing!”

To Nie Huaisang’s amusement, Wen Yuan’s expression went deadpan. “Great. No pressure.”

Wei Wuxian grinned at him cheekily, then offered a hand to the girl’s ghost. Huffing, she accepted the handclasp, and then just sort of… faded.

And then nothing happened!

“Oh, come on!” he whined, after a minute or two had passed and Wei Wuxian just sat there, eyes closed, apparently meditating or something. “Are we just supposed to sit here and *wait* for fifteen minutes? Shouldn’t there be spooky voices or stuff floating or glowing eyes or *something*?”

Wen Qing snorted inelegantly. “This isn’t a movie or TV series where visual spectacle is used as shorthand for supernatural powers,” she said dryly. “If qi were that obvious, it wouldn’t have been relegated to pseudoscience and pop fiction.”

Nie Mingjue chuckled. “Heck. Looking at it from a practical point of view, fancy light shows are probably the last thing you want. That would make for one giant *here I am, I’m up to something* flag.” He tilted his head, thoughtful. “Not to mention, physics. Energy going into making a lightshow is energy that’s *not* being used for whatever you’re doing. Even if it was a thing, I’ll bet part of training was learning to tamp it down.”

Nie Huaisang pouted. Sure, the point made *sense*, but this was about *style*! And of course Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan were busy watching Wei Wuxian do nothing rather than weighing in…

Lan Qiren cleared his throat slightly. “It may also be a matter of the technique in question. While it was not a *lightshow*, the sword did emit some light during the incident with Jin Zixun.”

Hah! Nie Huaisang held up his phone to hide a triumphant cackle. See? Even the old curmudgeon was interested in the shiny special effects!

“Speaking of whom,” Meng Yao said reluctantly, “if Doctor Wen is right about there being an informant on campus…”

Nie Zonghui winced. “He does have motive. And there has been a suspicious lack of trouble from that quarter these past few weeks, Boss.”

Thumbing through his newsfeed, Nie Huaisang scoffed. “I highly doubt he’s knowingly involved. A mole’s first job is to be *subtle*. Jin Zixun cares too much about his own ego for subtlety.” As he’d thought. No mention of anything out of the ordinary last night. Which was actually interesting, given the cleansing. What was the typical range for ordinary people to notice things like that, anyway?

“But even unknowingly, he’d make a useful stalking horse… or patsy,” Meng Yao noted. “If nothing else, he’s probably the weakest link on the project in terms of security. Which means he’s the best starting point we have to investigate the leak.”

Nie Mingjue exhaled heavily, rubbing his face. “Alright. I want you on that. Just *be careful*. The last thing we need is Jin Guangshan getting his fingers mixed into this mess.” He straightened. “Meanwhile…”

He was interrupted when Wen Yuan suddenly started, eyes widening. “Oh! I think…”

Taking a deep breath, the boy held out his hand, the silver ball resting on his palm. Closing his eyes, he furrowed his brow for a moment and then visibly caught himself and straightened his back before settling into a careful, measured breathing rhythm, the furrow smoothing away—

Silver floated up into the air, purple tassel trailing behind it as the bell began to spin in a small circle over Wen Yuan’s outstretched hand, chiming softly.

And Nie Huaisang was *absolutely* recording this, because *finally*, something good!

Huh… he’d somehow expected the bell to make a sharp, jangling sort of sound. Instead, it was a soft, sweet continuous chime. Given that there didn’t appear to be any slits or openings in the sphere, that did make a certain amount of sense; the sound reminded him of baoding balls. Which was *interesting*, considering that the technology to make those had only been developed during the Ming dynasty. Or maybe it was something more like singing bowls for meditation?

Ooo, someone should introduce Wei Wuxian to the meditation music industry. Between the flute and this, he’d make a killing! Not to mention that he *really* wanted to know if magic music would still work if you recorded and replayed it…

Wei Wuxian stirred slightly, drawing in a deeper breath and releasing it in a slow, steady exhale as he rolled his neck and shoulders slightly, and opened his eyes.

Eep?

He’d forgotten. Wei Wuxian was lighthearted and playful and had a wicked sense of mischief to rival Nie Huaisang’s own… and he was also a survivor of an era when brutal violence was the norm and *kill them dead* was considered a sane and rational way to deal with your enemies.

“Nie Mingjue,” Wei Wuxian said, terrifyingly calm against the dark fury in his eyes. “You trust your magistrates to deal with Xue Yang as they should?”

Nie Mingjue’s lips tightened. “I won’t lie. Comes to organized crime, corruption is always a problem.” His eyes narrowed. “But I will do everything in my power to make sure of it.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “Good. He needs to die.”

Once more for the record here: *Eep*.

“What did you learn?” Lan Wangji asked quietly.

Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly as he settled back in his chair, steely edges sheathed again. “Well. To start, our young friend was called A’Qing…”

As a narrative, the story was brilliant. Drama! Tragic pathos! Lost friends reunited by the plucky young heroine snatching bittersweet victory out of the hands of the villain!

As real events that had happened to real people? It *sucked*, zero out of ten, do not recommend, the universe owed him a refund!

A’Qing had apparently been a homeless child bouncing between shelters and the streets in a smaller coastal city outside Shanghai. How and why she’d ended up on the streets, Wei Wuxian apparently didn’t know—

But a chance encounter had led to her becoming friends with a local police detective, Xiao Xingchen – who had been trying to get answers about the disappearance of his partner Song Lan shortly after Xue Yang had killed the man’s family.

Apparently, while A’Qing hadn’t actually been blind, she’d gotten very, very good at *faking* it… so when Xue Yang showed up hanging around Xiao Xingchen, he overlooked her.

Wei Wuxian wasn’t clear on the details; odds were that A’Qing herself hadn’t known any specifics. But apparently Xue Yang had some kind of fixation on Xiao Xingchen. So when it turned out that Song Lan had been deep undercover investigating the crime ring Xue Yang was working with, when his cover was blown…

Xue Yang had decided to bait a trap for Xiao Xingchen. And have some *fun* with it.

A’Qing had done something about it. Ultimately, she’d gotten Song Lan out and to safety. But she hadn’t been so lucky.

Wei Wuxian didn’t say what happened next. He didn’t really have to. They’d seen her ghost.

Plus, well. *Ghost*. Which somehow didn’t make it any less of a gut punch.

“She has been following him since then,” Wei Wuxian concluded. “There isn’t much she can do, but sometimes even small things make a difference.” He smirked. “All the more so when she has someone to help her!”

Nie Mingjue snorted. “Bet she enjoyed that.” He pursed his lips, opened his mouth as if to ask something… then grimaced. “Damn. I was going to ask if she knew who hired Xue Yang for this… but if she’s been following Xue Yang around, she wouldn’t, would she? Whoever it is, they would have gone through a middleman.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “She doesn’t know, no. But!” He raised a finger. “There is someone else she’s been watching as well.”

Wen Qing’s eyes sharpened. “Xiao Xingchen.”

Nie Mingjue’s eyebrows raised. “Huh. Given he and Song Lan were both investigating Xue Yang… if nothing else, hopefully he’ll have a better idea of who we can go to with this mess.” He winced. “And… well. If they don’t already know what happened to A’Qing, I feel like we owe them that much. Not sure how to *explain* how we know…”

“You might as well tell them the truth,” Nie Huaisang said with a shrug. “Given we’re going to have to tell *everyone* at this point.”

Lan Qiren had listened to everything in thin-lipped, thunderous silence. But at that, he spluttered. “*What*? You cannot possibly be suggesting that we go public over this… this nonsensical interference!”

“I’m not suggesting, I’m *telling*,” Nie Huaisang said sharply. “Yes, we had a plan.” Not that even Lan Qiren could have seriously believed that they could actually keep the fact that *Yiling Laozu was alive* quiet for three years, but. “And that plan is utterly moot at this point, because in case you missed it, whoever sent these men *has access to the video*. Which means that they’re holding it like a sword over our heads, because they can release it whenever they want. *However* they want. And I can tell you right now, it would be child’s play to make the project look very, very bad. All it would take is leaving out the part where Dage throws Su Minshan out on his ear, and suddenly you have the project endangering the miraculous survivor *and* the kid trying to protect him. And I can tell you, the world will *gleefully* eat that narrative up.”

Lan Qiren huffed. “In which case we can simply explain…”

“That will not work,” Lan Wangji said flatly.

Lan Qiren bristled, and for a moment Nie Huaisang thought he might get to see one of the famous uncle-nephew renditions of the unstoppable force and immovable object, which would be entertaining but *not the time*.

But then intervention came from an unexpected direction. “He’s right,” Wei Wuxian said, propping his chin on his hand to watch them with interest. “People tend to believe whatever story they’re told first. Especially if it’s a *simple* story, with an easy bad person to feel righteously angry at. I’ve seen it happen before, more than once.”

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, but didn’t argue further, apparently more convinced by the guy from fifteen hundred years ago than the one he’d hired to *handle* this sort of thing. Hrmph.

Ah well. At least Lan Qiren was listening now. “Exactly,” Nie Huaisang said flatly. “We *have* to go public, now, so that we can control the narrative. No more stalling.”

Oh. He was *angry*. He hadn’t expected that.

Although he probably should have. Wen Yuan was adorable in the way that only overly-earnest teenagers could be, Lan Wangji was far too much fun to taunt, and Wei Wuxian was just a delight. And some entitled ass who had more money than brain cells had come after them.

Dammit, Dage! He’d accepted the job for the glorious chaos. Now he’d gone and gotten *invested*!

Wen Qing had been watching the argument with a raised eyebrow, but now she stepped in. “The problem, Director Lan, is that the original plan assumed that *we* would be the only ones with control over when and how the public would be informed. That’s not the case anymore.”

“And from a safety perspective… it’s actually more dangerous if we try to keep this under wraps,” Nie Mingjue said. “Issues of reporting an attempted crime when we can’t tell them what it was aside, think about what would have happened if they’d *succeeded*. How do you report the kidnapping of someone that no one would believe even exists? If we go public, that will make it harder for them to try pulling this again.” He grimaced. “And don’t forget that we got lucky. They hit on the one night that Lan Wangji and Wen Yuan weren’t there.”

Lan Qiren grimaced. “…Your point is taken,” he growled ungraciously. But then he squared his shoulders and raised his chin, resolute. “Very well, then. If we are to go public with our results now, how will we do so?”

Nie Huaisang already had the notes open on his phone. “First, you need to record a formal statement for us to release along with the video,” he said briskly. “I can help you workshop the specifics.” Easy enough; he already had a template prepared, it wouldn’t take much to fine-tune. The hardest part would be convincing the stubborn old goat that it was all his idea. And coaching him on proper media presence.

Ah. Speaking of. He added a quick reminder for himself; he’d have to let Gao Huiqing know that the timeline for the formalwear they’d commissioned would have to be stepped up.

Wei Wuxian glanced between them. “These statements are… public declarations? Should I…?”

“Absolutely not,” Lan Qiren huffed. When the cultivator blinked, the director frowned at him. “The entire *point* of delaying the announcement was to give you time and space to adjust to living in the twenty-first century on your own terms. Our timetable may have to change, but dealing with the public is not and should not be your responsibility.”

Hm. Nie Huaisang mentally juggled options for a moment, then nodded to himself. That would work, especially if they played up the attempted kidnapping. Building sympathy for Wei Wuxian’s situation was definitely going to be a priority, just to give him some protection from the circling special interest sharks!

Nie Zonghui cleared his throat. “We should probably give a heads-up at least to the dean of the university as well; man deserves a grace period before the bombs fall. Not to mention all the other project members.”

Wen Yuan’s face brightened at that. “Does that mean we get to tell the peripheral project members now?”

“Probably a good idea,” Nie Huaisang said, noting the anticipatory grin that spread across the boy’s face with amusement. “Which reminds me. Lan Wangji can be off the hook for the first round, what with everything, but you should record a statement as well, Doctor Wen, as the primary physician involved.”

“I have one prepared,” she said with a nod, and looked at Nie Mingjue. “I assume you’ll handle briefing security?”

He huffed. “Not much choice. If we thought the protestors were bad *before* this…”

“Ah… about that,” Meng Yao said diffidently. “We should also consider briefing people connected to project members. And perhaps inviting them to campus for the duration.”

Lan Qiren frowned at him. “For what reason?”

“Wen Yuan was targeted,” Meng Yao pointed out. “He’s relatively safe here, and most of his family is already involved… but it wouldn’t be hard for people to track down his friends, or the families of other project personnel.”

Everyone blanched at that. Harassment by the media or the public would be a problem all on its own. And they already knew that whoever was behind the kidnapping attempt had no compunctions about hiring someone who would hurt and kill kids.

Wen Qing was particularly pale. “My brother…”

Lan Qiren’s expression was back to *thunderous*, but this time it wasn’t directed at anyone in the room. With a sharp nod, he declared, “We can at least offer dormitory space to family members and any minors who are likely to be at risk, at least through the remainder of the summer. I will make the necessary arrangements with the university. I will leave the decision regarding who to invite to you.”

Nie Mingjue nodded. “Zonghui, Meng Yao, I’m delegating that to you. Make that your priority for the moment; Jin Zixun isn’t going anywhere. I’m going to be reaching out to Xiao Xingchen; I want Xue Yang in a secure lockup stat. Huaisang, give me a timeline on when we’ll be going public; try to give us a day or two to make arrangements and get people safe first. But first…”

He paused, grinning, as his words were cut off by the sound of a truly impressive yawn – followed by a squeak reminiscent of an offended kitten, as if Wen Yuan couldn’t *believe* his body had betrayed him like that. And then Nie Huaisang found himself fending off a yawn of his own, because now that the excitement of the oracle bone cleansing and the adrenaline rush of the subsequent unpleasant surprise was wearing off, he was suddenly acutely aware of

the fact that it was *morning* and they'd been up all night and dawn was *still* not fit for human consumption!

"…all of you, go get some *sleep*," Nie Mingjue said wryly. "Yes, this is urgent, but tired people make mistakes, and we need to be at the top of our game for this. I don't want anyone doing anything until you've had eight hours of sleep and eaten something. *Then* we can start working on the details."

"Oh *gods*."

At the tone of Wen Yuan's voice, Lan Wangji immediately stiffened and turned to look at the boy.

The main room of the Jingshi was… incongruously peaceful. The morning sunlight gleamed golden on polished wood, perfect counterpoint to the twittering of birdsong out in the garden and the soft sound of running water from the stream feeding into the pond.

Wen Yuan was staring at everything with white-rimmed eyes, his face shock-pale and hands shaking as he swayed slightly on his feet.

"They were coming *here*," he said, voice thin and thready and shaking as badly as his hands. "They had weapons, they saw the video, that Xue Yang is a murderer and they were *coming here*!"

"They did not get in," Lan Wangji said, pitching his voice low and steady and calm.

"And my head *knows* that, but—!" Wen Yuan cut himself off as his voice spiraled upwards and covered his mouth and nose with his hands, breathing through the obstruction in a technique meant to control hyperventilation.

Wei Wuxian rested a hand against the boy's back. "But this is your home. You're supposed to feel *safe* here." He shook his head slightly, gently steering Wen Yuan towards a seat. "It changes the way you see the world, when danger comes into a place you thought was safe. Everything becomes more frightening."

Wen Yuan laughed a little. "That's… a good way to put it, yeah," he admitted. "Right now, I just really want to crawl into a blanket fort and not come out for a whole year!"

Wei Wuxian blinked. "Blanket fort? What's that?"

Wen Yuan hesitated and then laughed again, this time sheepishly. "Um. Mostly just a silly thing that little kids do, really…"

Wei Wuxian held up a finger and grinned. "Hold that thought!" he told Wen Yuan, and then darted out of the room, leaving the boy blinking after him.

Satisfied that the situation was in hand, or at least stable, Lan Wangji stepped into the kitchen – although he positioned himself to keep one eye on the main room as he began pulling out the dishes he'd prepared before they'd left for the museum. He'd assumed that they would

likely be both tired and hungry by the time they returned, so he had made preparations for a simple, light meal that could be quickly reheated. Although for some reason, the stove refused to light…

Oh. His hands were shaking as well. That was why.

Carefully and deliberately, Lan Wangji resettled his grip, ignited the burner, and set it to low heat under the pot. Then he braced his hands on the countertop – *away* from the stove – and just focused on *breathing*.

Wei Wuxian was right. Knowing that his home had been threatened, his – guests, not family, but not simply friends either – in danger… it changed things.

Although… fear was part of it, yes. But it was dwarfed by the black, seething *fury*, because *how dare they!* And the sudden urge to grab whatever weapon came to hand and deal with the intruders permanently.

Which… would not be the correct course of action. Among other things, the criminals who had attempted to kidnap them were only the minions. Somewhere out there was the person who had commissioned the crime, and *that* was the real threat… because unless they could track that person down, there was nothing to stop them from trying again.

Right now, the thugs were the only lead they had. That was enough for him to sit on his more primeval impulses… barely.

A thump from the main room managed to pull him out of his seething. Looking up, he blinked… because apparently Wei Wuxian had stripped every available blanket from the guest room and was carrying them all in.

That was impressive. The blankets were not lightweight. Sometimes Lan Wangji forgot that as powerful as Wei Wuxian looked, the man was actually even stronger still.

Wei Wuxian dropped his bounty into a pile on the floor and then grinned at Wen Yuan. “Alright. *Show* me a blanket fort.”

Wen Yuan spluttered, but Wei Wuxian was both enthusiastic and insistent, and by the time Lan Wangji had managed to gather himself and finish preparing the meal, the two had constructed an absolutely ridiculous nest that probably made use of every single blanket, pillow and cushion in the entire building.

More importantly, the distraction appeared to have worked; by the time they finished eating the light breakfast Lan Wangji had made, Wen Yuan was yawning again, and the wild-eyed delayed panic reaction had given way to heavy-lidded sleepiness.

As they finished tidying the dishes, Wen Yuan looked at the blanket fort and laughed sheepishly. “You know, I almost hate to take that down.”

Wei Wuxian made a mock-horrified sound. “Take it *down*? After all that work?” With a dramatic flop, he sprawled into the blankets. “I’m sleeping right here!” He grinned at them.

“Come on, we all need some sleep, and this is cozy!”

Rather to his own bemusement, Lan Wangji somehow found himself included in that – although given that he was fairly certain that Wei Wuxian had raided his bed for materials, it was more making a virtue of necessity. But the impromptu blanket fort was… actually quite comfortable. A little tight on space, yes, and likely to get a little stifling once the afternoon heat set in, but the sides had been arranged to block the light as much as possible while still allowing airflow, and despite the close quarters it was… reassuring, to know that the other two were right there with him.

Wen Yuan seemed to think so as well; Lan Wangji could feel the boy finally relaxing as they settled in, and he simply blinked sleepily as Wei Wuxian pulled out his bell again. “What is that, anyway? How come it doesn’t make noise normally?”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “It doesn’t make noise because that would sneaking up on things much harder! As for *what* it is…” He held out his hand and flicked his fingers, setting silver chiming. “It’s called a qīngxīn líng. It’s a spiritual tool for smoothing the flow of qi; the Jiang were the best at making them. A powerful one could even be used as a ward, but they are also useful for healing and to help with meditation…”

Wei Wuxian’s voice was soft and measured, the easy cadence blending into the quiet chiming, and Lan Wangji was not the least bit surprised to hear Wen Yuan’s breathing settle and slow into sleep.

Neither was Wei Wuxian, going by the way his eyes were laughing. “And he’s out,” he said, and looked at Lan Wangji. “You should sleep, too. I can keep watch. That was a *very* busy night!”

Lan Wangji frowned at him. “You did more than I.”

“Ah!” Wei Wuxian held up a finger, grinning, although he kept his voice pitched soft to not disturb the sleeping teenager. “But your Director Lan has said that *I* don’t need to do anything about our unwanted visitors, except to keep them from making trouble until Xiao Xingchen comes. So it doesn’t matter if I’m a bit sleepy today.” He shrugged, smile turning wry. “Besides. This would hardly be the first time that I’ve taken watch after a long night hunt. I can… what was the phrase A’Yuan used the other day? I can manage a few all-nighters.”

It was that momentary stumble in phrasing that finally brought an inchoate sense of something *odd* into focus. “Your speech patterns have changed.”

It was subtle – in part because of how well he’d mastered the language already, in part because he still spoke with a hint of a lilting accent. Lan Wangji was not entirely certain when the shift had even happened. But outside of the momentary hesitance over an unfamiliar word or turn of phrase, Wei Wuxian was speaking *fluently* now, with the cadence and unthinking ease of a native speaker.

The man blinked, momentarily taken aback by the sudden change of subject. Then he chuckled. “Ah, yes, it would have! A’Qing helped me a bit.”

When Lan Wangji hesitated, puzzled, Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Empathy is not just standing back and *watching* what a ghost remembers. I am *in* the memory. It was like I *was* A’Qing.”

“That… seems risky,” Lan Wangji said slowly, feeling like the words were utterly inadequate to what Wei Wuxian was saying. Because A’Qing had *died*, in a terrible manner. Had Wei Wuxian experienced that as well?

The cultivator hummed. “It can be tricky, especially with ghosts who do not have a strong sense of… who they are. I could not have done it with little Long Fengli, for example. It would be too easy to get who I am and who she was all mixed up.”

Lan Wangji did his best not to blanch. He hadn’t even *considered* that side of it – that there might be a risk of *losing* oneself in the process. “You could become possessed?”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Not so easily! It can happen with Empathy, if you don’t do it right, but true possession takes something that allows the ghost to hold on to you. The danger is more… going so deep that you forget what is the ghost and what is *you*.” He shrugged. “But! A’Qing is a strong ghost. It was fairly easy to separate what she *knew* from who she was.” His grin turned a little crooked. “And to be honest, I was *very* tired of getting headaches from a simple conversation! So. I let a little bit of what she knew stick. Not so much words, that would be much more complicated. More the *feeling* of how the language fits together.”

Lan Wangji turned that over in his mind, then nodded slowly. It still seemed a risk to him… but then again, he was neither the one navigating the world in a still-new language, nor was he the spiritual expert. He hardly had the right to criticize Wei Wuxian’s choices when he knew neither the dangers nor the options.

Although. There was one part of that statement he was curious about – and now he could be more confident that it was a deliberate turn of phrase and not simply an awkward choice of wording. “You said she *is* a strong ghost. Is she still lingering, then?” There’d been no sign of A’Qing after Wei Wuxian came out of Empathy, and on some level he’d assumed that she must have passed on once her story was known, but…

Wei Wuxian laughed softly. “Oh, she hasn’t gone anywhere! She’s keeping an eye on Xue Yang for me.”

Ah. That was practical. And perhaps more comforting than it should be. But… well. A watcher who would not tire and could not be perceived by the one watched did have certain advantages.

Wei Wuxian reached across the small space of the blanket fort and poked him gently in the shoulder. “So *sleep*,” he said again, the clarity bell still chiming.

“…I don’t know if I can,” Lan Wangji admitted. He *wanted* to; he could feel the fatigue and weariness dragging at his mind and limbs. At the same time, he was acutely aware that outside their little sanctuary of blankets and pillows it was *morning*, and trained habit insisted that he should be up and about his day, even when his conscious mind knew that to do so would be worse than unproductive.

But more than that…

He exhaled slowly, making himself face the deeply *unsettled* feeling in his head and heart. "It is not just the threat to my home," he admitted at last. "I am… unaccustomed to dealing with physical violence."

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully. "I wondered," he admitted. "It was… strange, when I first left the lab, to see so many people out and about without carrying even so much as a staff or dagger. Even common folk usually had *something* handy to defend themselves."

"Common bandits are less common now," Lan Wangji said – but the words tasted like a lie, or at least untruth. After all, muggings certainly were a problem, and the crime rings that the likes of Xue Yang worked for were in many ways banditry writ large. That he considered such things distant and unusual… probably said more about his privileged background than it did the realities of the modern world. Sighing, he said, "We should speak to Nie Mingjue, when he has time. He is better versed in the dangers of this time."

"That would be useful," Wei Wuxian said. "I would definitely like to know more about your weapons! To be honest, catching that one the day I woke up was mostly luck. Not something I want to depend on if it happens again!"

"I will arrange time for us to talk to him," Lan Wangji promised, still watching the clarity bell. Wei Wuxian had kept it going throughout the entire conversation, and the low, continuous chiming was… very soothing. Which he suspected was entirely intentional.

He did not object. It was not unlike listening to a singing bowl – which made him wonder if perhaps they were related. Did singing bowls represent a cultivation tradition as well? He knew that standing bells potentially dated as far back as the Shang; did cultivation as Wei Wuxian practiced it also have roots in those traditions?

And what of the clarity bells? Wei Wuxian had carried his on his belt, and implied that they were common cultivation tools, at least in the Jiang tradition. Where were they in the archaeological and historic record? Had they simply been lost as cultivation was forgotten? How many had been found over the ages, or tucked away among family heirlooms, with no one who could actually use them to reveal their nature?

Oh. He was drifting off – he recognized the idle meandering of his thoughts. But there was one other thing…

He roused himself just enough to murmur, "If the project is going public… We should discuss what you are comfortable with the general public knowing about you personally, and your cultivation. Wen Yuan has a list of questions from the rest of the project members that will help you know what to expect." And they should review their own notes on the apparent disappearance of anything related to the sects from the historical record. Perhaps there was someone who might have stumbled across a missing key.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Later – when you are awake!"

Wei Wuxian paused, blinking at the screen. “Lan Zhan? Why would anyone be asking for some of my *hair*?”

Lan Wangji’s face was calm as still water, as always, but he was laughing at Wei Wuxian’s confusion! He could tell! “By studying hair, one can learn much about a person’s diet over the course of the past several months.”

Wei Wuxian made a strangled sound in frustration and threw his hands in the air, letting the tablet with its endless list of picayune questions fall to the table with a satisfying *thump*. “Then why don’t they just ask about *that*?” he complained.

“Human memory is often unreliable,” Lan Wangji said, and ow! Zing, as Wen Yuan said. “Indirect evidence is one way to circumvent that.”

Hm. Well, the man wasn’t *wrong*; Wei Wuxian had used similar tactics himself to coax information out of unaware or recalcitrant informants during night hunts on occasion. However…

“Why would they be so interested in what I’d been eating?” Really. *Why*. It made no sense.

“It is not what you yourself ate. What they wish to learn about is what people *in general* ate,” Lan Wangji explained.

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. “Lan Zhan. I spent the last three years,” of his subjective time, at least, “living in the Burial Mounds. I was getting by on what I could find and inedia. That wasn’t exactly *normal*!”

Lan Wangji tilted his head. “That is a weakness of archaeological research. The general assumption is that anything that survives in the archaeological record must represent something relatively common.” He paused pointedly. “But if one were not inclined to offer the benefit of the doubt, it is possible that it did not occur to the scholar in question that he had the *option* of simply asking.” His expression never wavered, but Wei Wuxian could feel the sardonic amusement as he added, “And it is a truth universally acknowledged that when one has dedicated one’s life to an obscure subject, it seems unthinkable that anyone else might *not* find the minutiae of it equally riveting.”

Wei Wuxian cackled. Oh yes, he knew the type! And it was *fun* when Lan Wangji let his sarcastic side out to play. Still chuckling, he picked up the tablet again. This time, rather than reading, he just scrolled through it, skimming his eyes over the contents as he went.

And scrolled. And scrolled.

“Lan Zhan. How long *is* this?”

“…It was originally much longer,” Lan Wangji admitted, after a telling pause. “Wen Yuan removed any duplicate questions, as well as the ones that were… inappropriate.”

Well, *that* was a terrifying thought!

Huffing something between a laugh and a groan, Wei Wuxian flopped forward onto the table, shoving the tablet aside. “There’s no way I can answer all of these!” He *still* hadn’t gotten to the end of the list! And given how nosy some of the questions were, he was afraid to ask what had been considered *inappropriate*.

Scholars made for the *worst* gossips, and he knew for a fact that rules carved in stone made no difference.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly, just the tiniest shadow of a furrow in his brow. “You are not obligated to answer any of it.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled, turning his head enough to smile wryly at the man. “I do know how these things work, you know.”

The shadow of a furrowed deepened, a hint of tightness coming into the line of Lan Wangji’s jaw. “You did not ask to be involved. You are *not* obligated,” he insisted, and if he’d been any less dignified Wei Wuxian would have called his tone *mulish*.

Amused by the mental image – Lan Zhan as a mule! – Wei Wuxian straightened, taking a moment to extend his arms up over his head and stretch his back a bit. “And I do appreciate it! But like I said, I do know how this works. Better not to give myself a reputation for being *difficult* if I don’t have to.” Sometimes it was necessary, of course. And sometimes it was a foregone conclusion and there was no point in even trying to be accommodating! But it came at a cost. Better to avoid it until he had a clearer idea of the doors he would be closing.

“Boundaries are important,” Lan Wangji said stubbornly. “The researchers are not entitled to demand anything from you. And there are other ways to approach their questions.” Snapping the rings of the binder he’d been assembling closed, he pushed it across the table towards Wei Wuxian. Intrigued, Wei Wuxian tugged it around for a closer look, flipping through the first few pages.

And began to laugh. “Lan Zhan! Have you been writing down everything I’ve ever said?”

“Documentation is imperative,” Lan Wangji said stiffly. “I would have been remiss not to. But I do not want to share any information without your express permission.” He hesitated. “And… if possible, more than your permission, I would prefer you to be a knowing participant. This is, ultimately, *your* story.”

Wei Wuxian had to laugh at that. “Are you seriously suggesting I write my own version of the *Shiji*?” he asked, deeply amused.

“That… might be prudent,” Lan Wangji admitted slowly. “As my uncle said, there are many people who will want to know your story. You may not wish to leave the telling of it to others.”

Wei Wuxian hummed as he continued flipping through the pages. Lan Wangji did have a point, he supposed; he’d seen for himself how easily people could discard or dismiss facts in favor of a satisfying story. It was just… amusing and a little bizarre to think of *himself* being

featured in a modern Sima Qian's list of great poets and scholars and generals. Especially when his most notable accomplishment in the eyes of the modern world was "not dead yet!"

Then he hit the next section and spluttered. "You even kept the sketches?!"

Which ranged from the painting of the Cold Springs as Wei Wuxian had known them, to portraits of Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli and others, a very oddly colored drawing of Lotus Pier that had been his first attempt at experimenting with markers, even a sloppy sketch of a map of the Sunshot Campaign that he'd done on the back of a scrap of paper – *all* of them diligently scanned and reprinted on good paper, apparently!

"They are renderings of the past created by an eyewitness," Lan Wangji said. "They carry important data in their own right and deserve to be included."

"They're *sketches*!" Wei Wuxian protested. He'd done a *lot* of drawing, especially early on; it had frequently been easier than fumbling through stilted descriptions in a limited vocabulary and awkward grammar. Much easier to grab a brush and dash off something quick – emphasis on *quick*!

"You are welcome to redo them if you like," Lan Wangji said. "But even the sketches are fine work. I would not be surprised if people reach out seeking to purchase them. Or at least prints of them." His expression didn't shift, but Wei Wuxian got the distinct impression of smugness when he added, "I believe Wen Yuan has already laid claim to the original of the Cold Springs painting."

Really, this man! How was Wei Wuxian's poor heart supposed to handle this much sincerity?!

Huffing, Wei Wuxian looked back at the drawings. Well, they certainly weren't bad – even if he personally found the marker drawing of Lotus Pier to be more hilarious than anything else! "I suppose it *would* be nice to have some money to buy things," he admitted, thinking back to the stores they'd visited. Not to mention that he had yet to find out if Emperor's Smile was still made in Caiyi!

Lan Wangji's spine stiffened slightly at that. Huh. Had he somehow said something insulting?

"You are not without funds," Lan Wangji said firmly. Ah – that was him being angry on Wei Wuxian's behalf, not the other way around. "The university owes you a fee for your assistance with the oracle bones; we have yet to pay it only because your circumstances have prevented us from establishing a bank account for you. You have also been teaching cultivation to myself and Wen Yuan; you deserve to be paid for that service as well."

Huh. That was an interesting thought. In the sects, disciples repaid their training with loyalty and service, and received the support of the sect in turn. But then again, there was no sect for support here, which made him more like the private tutors who schooled would-be scholars, or rogue cultivators training the sons of merchants and nobility in the basics of cultivation for a fee.

"In addition, as the primary subject of the project, you are entitled to compensation for your assistance," Lan Wangji concluded. And then hesitated. "Is there something you would prefer

to do? I know that this cannot be anything like what you once planned for yourself."

That was unexpected enough that Wei Wuxian was startled into a rueful laugh. "I never thought much about it," he admitted. "I was a Jiang disciple. What I would do was already decided." Oh, he'd toyed idly with the thought of striking out as a rogue cultivator like his parents – all young disciples did! But he'd also been acutely aware of how dangerous life without the protection of a sect would be. And… well. Jiang Cheng's reaction when he'd gone to the Burial Mounds had been explosive enough, and that was well within standard practice for sect disciples going into secluded cultivation. He didn't want to consider Jiang Cheng's probable reaction if he'd actually *left* the sect.

Messy, without a doubt. And probably vindictive – to prove to Wei Wuxian, the world and Jiang Cheng himself in particular just how much he didn't care.

And, really, he *liked* being the first disciple of the Jiang. Training the junior disciples, planning night hunts, keeping an eye on their trade partners – it was interesting! And if there was a part of him that thought wistfully of hazy almost-memories of a woman riding a donkey with a man walking alongside, and a small child traveling with them…

Well, come to think of it, he had yet to see a single donkey in this new era! And somehow a car just did not have the right *ambiance*.

Lan Wangji nodded slightly when he shrugged, and then looked at him intently. "You should know that whatever you choose to do, you are always welcome here."

Wei Wuxian beamed at him. He knew he couldn't read *too* much into the words; as Lan Qiren had said, looking after him was Lan Wangji's responsibility, and he was not the sort to approach his responsibilities with anything less than wholehearted diligence!

But Wei Wuxian liked to think he'd gotten a fairly good sense of who Lan Wangji was, and he knew that the man did not say anything he didn't mean. So if he said that Wei Wuxian was *welcome*, then he meant exactly that. And that was… nice, to know Lan Wangji genuinely *wanted* him to stay at the Jingshi if he was so inclined.

Although. "Are you sure?" he asked carefully. "The dangers aren't going to go away."

Oh, the risk of another kidnapping attempt would be *less* once this whole "going public" business was taken care of. But he knew a bit about the sort of mind that did things like that. This was a temporary setback only. There *would* be another.

Not to mention that given what he knew about the issues at the university gates – really, all this fuss over little old him? Such flattery! – well. He had a feeling that "going public" was not going to improve matters there, either.

"I am aware," Lan Wangji admitted. "I will not say that it is not a concern. But I refuse to let that shape my actions."

That was fair, Wei Wuxian had to grant, nodding thoughtfully. And brave, given Lan Wangji's admission that he was not familiar with violence. Which was a truly strange thing to

wrap his mind around; war had *always* been a possibility hovering in the air, in his time. Then again, he *had* thought, in those early days before he had truly grasped what had happened, that Lan Wangji reminded him of a sheltered young noble: conscious of the world beyond the family walls on an intellectual level, but unable to truly *comprehend* just how different it was from his own lived experience…

Hm. "You do practice a combat form," Wei Wuxian noted. Granted, a very, *very* stylized one, but one that did have an underlying structure of physical control, balance and strength.

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. "Tai Chi… does have origins in a self-defense form, originally. But as it is practiced today, it is more a form of moving meditation, meant for health and cultivating mental focus." He hesitated. "I do not know if I could use it to fight."

Wei Wuxian hummed, drumming his fingers on the binder still lying open on the table in front of him. Because, thinking about it… well.

All cultivators learned the sword path, of course. And to handle themselves in combat against yao and gui and such. But while Jiang cultivators learned to fight against other people – if only because hunting for the source of water ghouls often turned up pirates! – he'd met many cultivators who were so focused on the sword path for prestige and cultivation that they almost forgot that swords were, fundamentally, sharp-edged and pointy things designed to *kill people*. That they were *weapons*. Even among the Jiang, there'd been many who'd been deeply unprepared, mentally, to find themselves fighting *other cultivators* outside of sparring matches and civilized competitions at conferences. That was part of why they'd lost so many in the Wen invasion; far too many had been so mentally unprepared that they couldn't react in time to realize they needed to *escape*.

And one reason they'd been so unprepared was that Sect Leader Jiang and Madam Yu had simply been unable to actually believe that such an attack could actually happen. It simply wasn't the way the world was supposed to work.

"Do you want to learn?" he asked. Because he did understand Lan Wangji's reservations, his preference for peace, but he didn't want anything like the fall of Lotus Pier to happen again.

"Yes."

Oh. Well then. That was a faster answer than he'd expected!

"Those men targeted my home. They had tranquilizer darts specifically prepared for me." Lan Wangji's tone was calm, but his eyes were fierce. "I refuse to be a vulnerability to be exploited." He settled his shoulders slightly, intensity easing. "I admit that I hope it will prove unnecessary. But it is better to have the skills and not need them, than to need them and be lacking."

Wei Wuxian chuckled. Now *that* sounded very like the scholar he had come to know! "Then when we are done here, perhaps we can work on that." He eyed the binder and sighed. Going through all of that would likely take more than just a single session anyway. Then a thought occurred to him and he looked up again. "Do you think Wen Yuan would like to join us?"

Lan Wangji considered that. “We should at least extend the offer, when he comes back.”

“What is he doing, anyway? He certainly left in a hurry.” The boy had been out the door almost as soon as they’d put the main room back in order!

Lan Wangji smirked – an actual, real, heart-stopping *smirk*! “I believe he is helping my uncle prepare to inform the rest of the project. There are certain individuals whose reactions he has been very much looking forward to.”

LEXICON:

Shiji (*Shǐjì*, 史记) – usually called *Records of the Grand Historian* in English. This was the first attempt at writing a comprehensive history of China, compiled by Sima Qian during the Han Dynasty. It includes a lot of biographies, and Sima Qian included an autobiographical section about himself. (The idea of Wei Wuxian writing his own autobiography is also a little hat-tip to the fic *Alexandria* that inspired this one!)

Qīngxīn Líng (清心铃): the Jiang clarity bell. Interestingly, the term translated “clarity” means “purified heart” or “peaceful mind.”

Also, just for fun – something that came up in the comments on the last chapter is that the various translations use the terms “ghoul” and “ghost” seemingly interchangeably, even for demonstrably physical beings. My suspicion is that the term being used is actually 鬼 (guǐ), which, although having the dictionary definition of “ghost,” is the term used in the question in Lan Qiren’s class to mean “creature coming from dead humans.” Which suggests it can serve as a generic term applying to any kind of undead.

NOTES:

Yes, I played a little fast and loose with Empathy here. But if you’re experiencing the world through someone else’s eyes… well, I could see a bit of language transference happening! (Also, by this point Wei Wuxian pretty much had already mastered the language, so I felt like he’d earned a handwavy cheat to get him the rest of the way.) And note that I already established in the opening chapters that, for the purposes of this fic, the dangers of Empathy expressed in canon were the result of him playing them up a bit.

Don’t ask me to be any more detailed than this about the Yi City analogue. I *hate* tragedy. It actually took a long time for Vathara to wear me down into looking at MDZS, simply because the basic premise – “main character was killed, story starts with being summoned back” – is honestly a nope right there even *before* you get into the nastiness of what led to it, for me. Sorry, but I have hard limits on how much bad stuff happening to a good person I can tolerate in my escapism. There’s too much of that in real life already!

But seriously, I agree with Wei Wuxian. Xue Yang Needs To Die.

The novel isn't clear about how long Empathy takes. But given that Lan Wangji is actively fighting Xue Yang for the length of the Yi City flashback, I'm saying that it can't be all that long, and the juniors' antsy worrying has more to do with teen impatience than Wei Wuxian taking too long!

Regarding the clarity bell, I'm drawing on the donghua design for visuals and the description of the sound. Which are both reminiscent of baoding balls, which are hollow iron shells with a coil inside that rings when you move them; the fact that the shell is completely sealed gives them a softer sound than most small bells. (Silly headcanon: the Jiang clarity bells *are* basically baoding balls, but the chime inside is a spiritually charged magnet, so unless there's an active flow of qi to release the magnet, it just sticks in one place and therefore doesn't ring.) And there's no real indication of *how* exactly they're used, but given that Wei Wuxian created a very powerful one to ward away malicious spirits for baby Jin Ling, I'd say they can be used as wards, and aren't dependent on having a golden core or even much in the way of qi training!

When it comes to acquiring a reputation as difficult… well. "He won't like me no matter what I say to him, so I might as well say what makes me happy," Wei Wuxian says of Lan Qiren. And that, to me, is pretty indicative of his approach to people. Wei Wuxian generally starts out courteous; in that class with Lan Qiren, Wei Wuxian's behavior is perfectly in line with expected comportment. Even when he makes his argument about resentful energy, he's following a model of student-teacher interaction laid out in the *Analects* (although he's absolutely saying the most outrageous thing possible). It's *Lan Qiren* who breaks with acceptable behavior – first by actively setting out to humiliate Wei Wuxian (and, I'll note, indirectly humiliating *every other guest disciple in the room* in the process), then by responding with shouting and violence rather than engaging with the point he's making. (Sound familiar? Seriously, Lan Qiren is basically a walking microcosm of everything that's wrong with cultivation society, it's really an awesome setup for the rest of the novel.) But he's quick to figure out that Lan Qiren has already decided that he is "one of humanity's greatest threats!" (yes, that's a quote) and there's no point in trying to appease the guy.

What I find interesting is that he takes the exact same approach to dealing with Madam Yu. He can't make her happy, so he doesn't bother. He stands up to her if her vitriol crosses a line that he cares about, and otherwise he (figuratively) rolls his eyes. It's also striking that the novel is explicit that this is one of the things that infuriates Wen Chao – Wen Chao would try to make a show of publicly mocking Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian shrugs it off because, seriously, he deals with Madam Yu on a daily basis and *Wen Chao* thinks he's going to leave a mark?

Which would also explain his reduced tolerance for it after the war. He's dealing with people of his generation, not authority figures, he's seen where that attitude can go, and the stakes are higher. Although personally I think the vast majority of his confrontational persona has to do with that persona being vital to hiding a very dangerous secret.

Personal headcanon here… I suspect his resistance to Madam Yu's vitriol has a great deal to do with the fact that he was already nine years old when he came to Lotus Pier; still young,

but he would already have a lot of his core personality traits established. More than that, he survived on the streets for an indeterminate length of time before that. It's not clear how old he was when his parents died, but the implication is that it's been a while, so between five and eight seems likely. The simple fact that he *survived* means that he mastered the art of picking himself up and keeping going even after being knocked down. More than that… as one very good meta put it:

> *By the time he was orphaned, he must have already been relatively autonomous and had a positive impression of himself (he probably had amazing and affirming parents) and was in an initiative phase. Basically, baby WWX would've decided to roll up his sleeves and survive. The little kiddo was probably making complex decisions every day on how to get food, where to sleep, which places were safe, who was safe, etc.*
>
> *WWX probably established his sense of self and competency very early. By the time he was at the Jiangs, he probably considered himself very competent. So baby WWX was like 'I can do it' and it cemented into his being and then he was like 'I'm good at this' and that cemented into his being as well.*
> (https://vrishchikawrites.tumblr.com/post/657236322141044736/do-you-ever-think-of-how-little-wei-ying-might-not).

In other words: Wei Wuxian has what's called an *internal locus of control*. Basically, he views events not in terms of what *happens to him*, but in terms of what *he can do*.

Which, among other things, is associated with a reduced chance of developing PTSD. And to be honest, I don't think the Wei Wuxian of the novel has PTSD. Yes, he goes through terrible things, and if you just described his background and then said, "And so this character has PTSD," then sure, it would make perfect sense! But… he doesn't actually show the symptoms. No mention of nightmares. No mention of excessive drinking (though I'm given to understand that CQL changed that). No hypervigilance except in circumstances where caution is warranted. No signs of depression. No avoidance of people or places associated with what happened. Even his sharper temper during and after the war is always reasonable given the provocation he's facing.

(Yes, Lan Wangji acts like Wei Wuxian's anger at Jin Zixuan at Phoenix Mountain was irrational. The novel also explicitly points out that Lan Wangji *does not know about the soup incident* or the fact that Jin Zixuan never apologized for publicly humiliating Jiang Yanli on false information, and therefore is missing key context about why Wei Wuxian hates the guy.)

(Not to mention that Lan Wangji seems to ignore the fact that Jin Zixuan, for his part, went after Wei Wuxian with a sword when Wei Wuxian pushed him away from *grabbing* Jiang Yanli. So there's a bit of a double-standard at play as well.)

It is true that Wei Wuxian changes during and after the war. He's not a happy fifteen-year-old anymore. He has harder edges, he's less inclined to blow off blatant insults (although, again, persona comes into play there). *Experience changes people*.

But I think people tend to forget that just because a situation *can* cause PTSD and trauma, it's never a given that it *will*. Sometimes people come out of truly horrific experiences

shockingly unscarred. Sometimes things that seem minor on the outside leave people marked for life. *It's unpredictable*.

Which, on a related note… where *does* the whole "oh, Lan Zhan doesn't want me! I'm a burden!" characterization of Wei Wuxian come from, anyway? Is that an import from CQL, or is it another example of "it would make sense for him to react that way, so of course he does"? Because Wei Wuxian never thinks, says, or does *anything* like that in the novel. From the moment he realizes that Lan Wangji knows who "Mo Xuanyu" really is, he doesn't question if Lan Wangji wants him around. Even when he's revealed at Jinlintai, he only asks *once* if Lan Wangji's sure about standing by him. Once Lan Wangji says yes, Wei Wuxian accepts that. Heck, even with him telling Jiang Cheng to kick him out after he rescues the Wens – that's always read more as a furious "well, eff you too!" than "oh, don't let me be a burden!" to me!

Though I suspect that a lot of it has to do with the whole "doesn't value himself" characterization, which (I'm sure you'll be shocked to hear) I also don't buy into. As noted, Wei Wuxian is perfectly willing to stand up to Madam Yu. And when it comes to things like Wang Liangjiao's demands to have him punished …

When a soldier makes a stand at the bridge, sacrificing himself to buy time, we don't say that he's self-destructive or that he doesn't value himself. We say he is *courageous and resolute*. When a knight gives his prince his sword, shield and horse so that the prince will live on, the knight is *brave and loyal*.

Doing your duty is not the same as *not valuing yourself*.

(And yes, I do think that the core transfer also falls under this category, since it's all tied up with Wei Wuxian's role as Jiang Cheng's protector and right-hand man. But more on that in a later chapter, this AN is already way out of hand!)

And as for Wei Wuxian giving up everything to protect the Wen survivors…

Here's the thing: standing by your moral code in the face of opposition is not an act of low self-worth. In fact, it is, in a way, an act of profound self-*respect*. There is a reason why it's practically a cliche for someone to say, "if I didn't do something, I wouldn't be able to look myself in the eye." It requires caring about your own values, morals and conscience.

Having values you're willing to die for is not self-destructiveness.

…though part of me suspects that idea that Wei Wuxian is self-destructive is connected to fandom's intense desire for fix-its. The problem is that, all too often, creating a "fix" for the situation changes the circumstances so that Wei Wuxian's sacrifice *isn't* actually necessary and therefore is actually meaningless and a product of just Not Trying Hard Enough and that means he didn't care enough about himself (or *the people he was trying to help*, apparently) to Find A Better Way…

As for the bit about cultivators forgetting that swords are, fundamentally, weapons: sorry, but I *judge* baby Lan Wangji for his habit of drawing his sword when he can't cope with his emotions. I don't *care* that it's part of his tsundere-ness and also feeding classic xianxia

tropes. *A sword is a lethal weapon designed specifically to kill other people*. Maybe it comes from living in a country where a disturbing number of people have an almost religious attachment to weapons, but I take *responsibility* regarding weapons very, very seriously. And you *do not* pull out a lethal weapon unless you are ready to bear the responsibility of *using it lethally* – because by pulling it out, you are taking the risk that you will kill someone even if that's not what you intended.

I also find it telling that Jin Zixuan also defaults to the same pattern of behavior – and that that's a major contributor to his death…

Chapter 17: Reveal

Chapter Summary

Wen Yuan has been *waiting* for this.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for Mo Xuanyu's backstory, and particularly his mother's circumstances and death.

Also, warning for implied swearing. Because the Big Secret is finally coming out, and people are expressing their reactions…

Yawning, Mo Xuanyu swiped his ID card at the reader and dragged the door into the dormitory open when the lock *thunked*, blinking owlishly in the stark light of the entryway. It was late enough by now to be edging into early, which he would love to claim was due to a wild night and wilder company…

But, well, actually he'd stumbled across an interesting record in the library's archives while he'd been looking a few things up for Wen Yuan, and had started digging, and the next thing he knew the library staff had been hunting him down to shoo him out so they could close for the night.

Which, he got it, he really did; no one wanted to work the graveyard shift, especially in the summer when there were no students to recruit for the work. But he thought he'd finally been getting somewhere!

Okay, fine, maybe it was kind of a nerdy somewhere that no one outside a tiny niche of historians would care about – and probably most of them would be more inclined to draw and quarter him for blowing up a thousand years of accepted historical narrative, because what he'd found was an old document implying that the Tang historians busily reconstructing the history of the Liang dynasty had gotten it wrong and Hou Jing had *never* actually succeeded in his attempted coup over the Liang Dynasty, that the various generals supporting this or that heir actually *had* succeeded in working together to take the would-be warlord down.

Which was *interesting*, because it meant that subsequent events – especially the purge of the generals-turned-warlords by the Chen clan and the subsequent conquering of the region by the future Emperor Wen – had to have happened slightly differently than the accounts in official histories. And, look, maybe it *was* nerdy and all, but he still thought it was *really neat*

when he'd pieced the little bits and pieces together and realized that, wait, some parts of the whole Yiling Laozu story – the folklore guy, not the ice mummy – might not be so impossible after all.

Whiiiich was kind of the problem. Because he *knew* that his academic advisor wouldn't support him following up on it. Students did not go around publishing papers that challenged the accepted orthodoxy, especially when the research didn't have anything to do with unveiling the hidden class struggle of the past yadda yadda, and the fact that it tied into the whole Yiling Laozu fever of the moment was just going to make it even harder to get published.

More to the point, he couldn't afford for Director Lan to decide that he was some fanboy obsessed with radical crackpot ideas and kick him off the project. He could not afford to mess that up, not when the internship was covering his housing so that he didn't have to go back to his aunt's house.

Halfway up the stairs to his floor, Mo Xuanyu hesitated. Because… Professor Lan Wangji was interested in ancient legends and literature. He'd even done papers on the Yiling Laozu legend. *He* might be interested.

Wen Yuan would say go for it. But Wen Yuan was practically Professor Lan's son. Much as Mo Xuanyu adored the kid, he definitely did not get that his mentor had a pretty hefty intimidation factor going on.

Okay, so the fact that Mo Xuanyu had the crush from hell didn't help. Even though it wasn't really *that* sort of crush, because he knew when he was way outclassed, okay? But he still had *eyes*.

Stepping out of the stairwell and into the hallway, Mo Xuanyu hesitated, wrestling with himself. Then he sighed and fished his phone out of his pocket. Maybe he didn't have the nerve to actually contact Professor Lan directly about this – sue him! – but he really should at least drop Wen Yuan a note. The kid would get a kick out of it, and besides, it was one of his random research requests that had turned up the lead to begin with…

Oh, lookie that, his spoiled brat of a cousin was trying to extort from him again. Somehow – *cough* – Mo Ziyuan had gotten the idea that because Mo Xuanyu's exam scores had gotten him into Cloud Recesses University, he *owed* Mo Ziyuan… something. Money, a prestigious university slot of his own despite the fact that his cousin had never actually studied in his entire life, *something*.

Honestly, it was kind of pathetic… although only from here, safely out of his cousin's reach. The last time he'd had to share a house with the guy, he'd stolen *all* of Mo Xuanyu's textbooks. And smashed his computer, when he couldn't get past the password. And Mo Xuanyu's aunt had declared it was all *his* fault for "not sharing."

There was a *reason* he really didn't want to be stuck going back there.

Still, Mo Ziyuan had the attention span of a fruit fly and the gumption to match, so as long as Mo Xuanyu stayed physically out of reach, the extortion attempts were all yap and no bite, so

he could safely ignore it—

Finger hovering over his messages, Mo Xuanyu's mind went blank with ice-cold dread. Followed by red-hot *fury*. Because the next message, solicitously asking after his health and studies, oh so concerned…

Great. His sperm donor *wanted* something.

The worst part was, there'd been a time when he would have been thrilled by that, back when Jin Guangshan had been this distant, larger-than-life figure in his mom's stories who'd turn up on occasion to drop an extravagant gift or smooth over a bit of trouble or pay for a trip. Right up until he'd suddenly stopped returning her calls, and all his staff started going, "Mo who?" Then the presents dried up, the money went away, promised opportunities never showed, and suddenly all the people who'd happily profited from the Mo family's connection to one of the most influential men in China were equally happy to snub and sneer at Mo Xuanyu's mother, calling her a foolish little girl and much more pointed things, until ultimately she'd…

Well. At least that explained why his cousin was trying to throw his weight around again. Odds were that the SOB had already reached out to the Mo family, confident that they'd cook up some nasty little pressure campaign to back Mo Xuanyu into a corner so he'd *have* to take whatever snake-oil "favor" the guy was offering.

Scowling, Mo Xuanyu slammed *DELETE* without opening the message. Oh, so sorry, but spam bots and phishing attacks these days, they liked to impersonate public officials, can't be too careful, *whoopsie*.

Still seething, he stalked over to the door to his room – a *private* room, thank all the gods and summer on-campus residence options – and almost missed the envelope on the floor as he shoved it open. He only noticed it when his toe caught the edge as he made to storm inside.

Baffled, he blinked at it. It probably said something that his first reflexive thought was *who's pranking me this time*; not something he'd actually had problems with at Cloud Recesses yet, but the lessons he'd learned in high school were not so easily forgotten. But after a moment, he registered the writing on the front, in Wen Yuan's handwriting. Which wasn't exactly *assurance* that it wasn't a prank – Wen Yuan knew how to work that look of earnest innocence! – but at least he could be fairly confident it wouldn't be a hurtful one. So he picked it up, raising an eyebrow when he realized that there was something small and hard in there, and took it over to his desk to open.

The small thing in the envelope turned out to be a thumbdrive, which had Mo Xuanyu shaking his head in disbelief – seriously, who even used thumbdrives these days? Was this a spy movie or something? There was a sheet of paper with a handwritten note wrapped around it. Amused, he turned on the desk light and started reading.

Mo-xiong,

I hoped to do this in person, but Professor Lan doesn't want me staying out late right now. By now you've probably figured out that something big happened with the Yiling Laozu project…

He couldn't help snorting, because no! Really? It hadn't gotten him curious at *all* when suddenly Professor Lan seemed to be spending all his time on the project, and Director Lan was paying for Wen Yuan *and* Mo Xuanyu to spend their time running around looking up all sorts of weird references! He'd kept his head down and his mouth shut – because, again, he needed the job – but he'd definitely spent some time trying to figure out what the *heck* they'd found on a dead body that was driving all this.

Due to some stuff that happened, the project is going public with one of our biggest findings on Friday. So Director Lan has given the go-ahead for us to notify some people in advance.

Give me a call once you're done screaming!

Mo Xuanyu snorted. Oh, that wasn't ominous at all. Wen Yuan was definitely enjoying this, whatever it was.

Alright, fine, now he was curious. Opening his laptop, he plugged the USB in and clicked on the video file.

Huh, opening screen with a very heavy-handed reminder that what he was about to see was confidential information. They were really going all-in on this, it was kind of a let-down when the video turned out to be just a shot of the lab with nothing really happening…

"*WHAT THE F—?!*"

Lan Jingyi slouched down in his seat and sighed. Loudly. "So what's going on, anyway?" he asked, eyeing the back of the driver's head. He didn't recognize the guy, but he'd introduced himself as Nie Zonghui, and he was wearing the uniform of Cloud Recesses' security guys.

And he'd showed up at their house at *nine in the morning*. Which Lan Jingyi's mom had apparently expected, because she'd just rolled Lan Jingyi out of bed, shoved a couple bao in his mouth and bundled both of them in the car for a ride to the university with no explanation!

Nie Zonghui just chuckled. "So you know how your friend Wen Yuan's been doing an internship with the Yiling Laozu project?"

Lan Jingyi crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. "No, of course I didn't notice my *best friend* disappearing off the face of the earth all summer," he grumbled. Because sure, he got it, the project was a big deal and all, but they'd had plans to hang out! And instead *all* the guys except Lan Jingyi were going places and doing stuff! Even Ouyang Zizhen was off traveling with his parents! He'd been so bored he'd started *doing his homework* without even being reminded and now his dad was threatening to take him to an exorcist!

"Jingyi," his mother said, and whoops, that was the Mom Voice. Although at least it was the "I think you're hilarious but not everyone will" one, rather than the "so help me…" version.

The security guy just laughed, though. "Well, long story short, the project is gearing up to make a big announcement soon, and frankly, we're expecting things to get pretty crazy for a

while. So we're playing things safe and offering to let friends and family stay on campus until the worst of it blows over."

Lan Jingyi blinked, abandoning his you-woke-me-up-at-nine-AM grumping to lean forward eagerly. "Does that mean we get to hear what the project's doing?" he asked. Because seriously, Wen Yuan had been doing the Mysterious Smile for a month now and it was driving him *crazy*!

His mother chuckled. "From what I hear, your friend has been on a mission to get you involved."

Lan Jingyi did *not* whoop, but he did pump his fist a bit. "Awesome!" Then he frowned slightly. "But… seriously, what's such a big deal, anyway?" Because yeah, he knew Jin Ling was mostly being a prickly jerk because he was stuck with his sleazeball of a grandfather in Shandong, but the kid had a point. How exciting could a dead guy *be*, anyway?

Nie Zonghui glanced over his shoulder for just a moment with a sly grin. "There's a tablet in the back of the passenger seat. Video should be queued up already."

Huh. Ooookay. Pursing his lips, Lan Jingyi fished the tablet out. Yeah, there was a video opened and ready…

"*Holy shi—!*"

"Jingyi!"

"Ma'am, with all due respect, I was *there* that day. The only reason I wasn't saying something a lot more colorful was that I didn't believe it was actually happening."

Lan Jingyi wasn't really listening. He was too busy gaping at the screen, completely at a loss for words, as the video kept going. And going. And going.

And the thing was, it was a *bad* video. The angle was boring and it never changed or moved, even when someone got in the way of the action. And there wasn't any sound, because… well, of course there wasn't, this was pretty obviously taken from *security camera* footage.

And that was what made it sink in that yes, this really was *real*.

So after the video ended, Lan Jingyi was good and made himself take several deep breaths, before turning his attention to the important stuff.

"Tell me that asshole's been fired," he gritted.

"*Lan Jingyi*." His mom turned in her seat to frown at him. "I don't care what was on that video, we do *not* use that sort of language!"

For once, he was too mad to care about the Mom Voice. "He *shot at Wen Yuan*! With a *gun*! If he hasn't been fired yet, I'm going to fire him with my *fist*!"

Nie Zonghui chuckled. “I’d pay to see that… but, yeah, he’s fired. Fired and arrested. Though… well. I think the director will cover the rest.”

Lan Jingyi’s mom shifted to eye both of them equally. “I would appreciate an explanation,” she said, her voice the calm steadiness that meant someone somewhere was going to be in a world of *yikes* if she did not get answers to her satisfaction.

“Long story short, ma’am: turns out that one of our officers was illegally carrying live ammunition, and tried to use it,” Nie Zonghui said. “Fortunately, no one was hurt. Unfortunately… we don’t think he was working alone. This is part of why the director asked to speak to you in person.”

Lan Jingyi’s mom stared at him. “What *happened*? I thought this was an archaeological research project!”

“Um.” Putting together what she was saying… “Has Mom… seen the video?” *Does she* know*?*, was what he really meant.

Nie Zonghui glanced at him through the rearview mirror. “Not the sort of conversation you can have over the phone,” he said wryly. “Or the kitchen table.”

Uh. Yeah. Especially given… “The, um, the *other guy*. Did he really…?” He made a vague sort of *grabbing bullets out of the air* gesture.

Nie Zonghui grinned like he *knew* how much this was breaking Lan Jingyi’s brain… which, well, he probably did. “Yep. And yeah, it means what you think it does.”

“*Whoa*.”

Yiling Laozu was alive. Yiling Laozu had actual crazy *cultivator superpowers*. No *wonder* Wen Yuan had been doing the Mysterious Smile for a month! Lan Jingyi was going to hug him and then *keel him ded*!

“…I have *so* many questions,” Lan Jingyi said numbly.

Nie Zonghui huffed a laugh. “You and the entire *world* when we go public tonight, kid. And now you know why we’re offering people a chance to hide from the mobs.”

…eep. Yes.

His mom was eyeing them both again, lips pursed. “I think I need to see this video,” she said. It wasn’t a request.

Nie Zonghui flicked a finger in permission; queuing the video up again, Lan Jingyi passed the tablet forward.

And waited.

“*Holy sh—!!*”

“Mom!”

The silence was broken by a slow exhale. “That’s… a lot to take in, Mister Nie,” Xiao Xingchen said at last, smiling ruefully. His companion didn’t say anything, outwardly expressionless, but after working with Lan Wangji so much, Nie Mingjue had learned to recognize the silent stoic version of *system error, brain rebooting, please hold*.

He could relate.

“You can see why I wanted to discuss the specifics in person,” he said ruefully, and nodded to them. “Thank you for coming all this way, and on short notice.”

That brought Song Lan out of his fugue; lips thinning into a grim line, he said, “Xue Yang has been a thorn in our sides for too long already.”

“We were relieved to hear he had been captured,” Xiao Xingchen agreed, before shaking his head. “Although we certainly didn’t expect… well!”

Nie Mingjue had to laugh at that. “I think it’s safe to say that *no one* expected Wei Wuxian,” he agreed dryly. “Nevertheless, I *do* appreciate you coming so quickly. We’re not equipped to hold criminals here. Wei Wuxian’s keeping them out for now, but it’s not a long-term solution. And…” He grimaced. “Given what we know and what we suspect, I don’t trust the Caiyi police to handle this one. And I want him out of here before we go public.”

“Wise,” Xiao Xingchen admitted. “On all counts. We’ve already contacted the relevant authorities to take Xue Yang into custody…”

“Now the question is if we can keep him there,” Song Lan growled.

Nie Mingjue raised his eyebrows. “That sounds like history,” he said as neutrally as he could.

The detectives looked at each other. Song Lan grimaced darkly, while Xiao Xingchen sighed heavily. “It is,” he admitted. “Unfortunately, it’s related to an ongoing investigation…”

“Tell him.”

Xiao Xingchen blinked at his partner. “Are you sure?”

“Xue Yang already got him involved, and he needs to protect the students here.” Song Lan’s eyes narrowed, dark and calculating. “And given what Xue Yang was up to here… this is a lead we can’t ignore.”

Xiao Xingchen slowly nodded, then looked at Nie Mingjue. “According to our sources, you’re trustworthy, Mister Nie.” His cheeks dimpled in a grin. “And given what’s been happening here, I know you can keep confidential information to yourself!”

Nie Mingjue snorted, amused. So they’d looked into him? Not surprising; he’d done the same.

Resting his hands on the conference table, Xiao Xingchen explained, “We first encountered Xue Yang when we were investigating what turned out to be a human trafficking ring being run through the Chang district in Yi.”

Investigating, found, and then successfully blew wide open, apparently. Which was damned impressive for a couple of detectives based in a small, out of the way coastal city.

Probably half of how they managed to pull it off. No one saw them coming.

“So you rounded the culprits up. Including Xue Yang, who was their wetworks guy,” Nie Mingjue summarized. “So what went wrong?”

“Officially, Xue Yang was executed,” Song Lan said flatly.

Nie Mingjue snorted. “They missed.”

Xiao Xingchen winced and sighed. “We learned that when he reappeared targeting Song Lan’s family.”

Oh. Damn.

“There were no survivors,” Xiao Xingchen continued. “And then Song Lan simply disappeared without any warning, and wasn’t responding to any attempts to contact him.” His smile then reminded Nie Mingjue of one he had seen on Lan Xichen: less a *smile* than simply a placeholder expression that meant nothing and thus let those around him assume it meant whatever they wanted it to. “I’m afraid I was… concerned.”

Song Lan winced at that, the first real crack Nie Mingjue had seen in that default stoicism. “I’d been contacted by a task force investigating the criminal organization that had been behind the human trafficking,” he explained. “I had undercover experience. We knew they’d be watching Xiao Xingchen – he was the face of the takedown. His partner, going rogue for revenge… it was a narrative we could sell.”

Oof. Nie Mingjue got the logic, sure. But, well, he’d joined the armed forces rather than law enforcement for a reason. He didn’t have the *temper* for an intricate investigation. There was a reason he relied on Meng Yao for those things.

Although. “Undercover experience or not, I’m surprised they asked you. I was under the impression that special task forces like that tended to hold their cards close.”

Oh boy. From the speaking looks those two exchanged, he was *not* going to like the answer.

“Xue Yang isn’t directly affiliated with any known criminal circles,” Xiao Xingchen said. “He works *with* them, but he’s not one of them. And yet someone falsified his execution.”

Nie Mingjue released a heavy breath. “You’re saying he has a backer.” Someone with deep pockets and a lot of influence.

Yeah, he didn’t like that at all, because that spelled *powerful party official*. Dammit, he had not signed up for *politics*!

Worse… "Xue Yang targeted the Yiling Laozu project, and Wei Wuxian specifically. Is he doing the hitman for hire thing, or do you think his backer is involved?" Because crime syndicates were one thing. If they had party officials pulling the strings on this…

Well. To be fair, he'd suspected for a while that someone unscrupulous had attempted to deliberately engineer a high-profile incident by getting Su Minshan those bullets and letting the protests at the gates go unchecked. This wasn't exactly a huge step from that. Which didn't make the implications any less ugly.

"There's no way to tell." Song Lan's eyes narrowed again. "But if he's nosing around, the task force needs to figure out why."

"Which means," Xiao Xingchen said, with a far more genuine smile this time, "that we should be clear to remain here and help you investigate, if you want."

Nie Mingjue felt some of that tightly wound tension ease from his shoulders. "That would be one hell of a relief," he said, not even pretending to hide it. "Because these are *way* deeper waters than anyone here can handle." Except maybe for the guy from a thousand years ago… but while Wei Wuxian might know how politics worked, he didn't know the movers and shakers and levers of the modern age, which meant he was as out of his depth as the rest of them in practice.

"We will help," the detective emphasized. "Even if the task force doesn't agree, we'll manage." His smile dimmed. "For A'Qing's sake, if nothing else."

Song Lan grimaced, looking away. Nie Mingjue didn't blame him. It was bad enough to have to be saved by a kid who had no business getting tangled up in your mistakes. Knowing that the kid had paid the price of that interference while *you'd* made it out… Yeah. That had to ache.

"If it's any comfort," he told them, "Wei Wuxian says she's all for helping us bring Xue Yang and his lot down."

Something he hadn't mentioned to anyone else. Meng Yao in particular had definitely been getting a little frazzled around the edges at the thought of ghosts being real; Nie Mingjue didn't want to risk that having a murdered kid still bopping around might be the thing that finally overloaded his poor subordinate's weirdness tolerance.

Xiao Xingchen blinked several times, opening his mouth once or twice before finally saying, "It… does help, actually. As odd a thought as that is."

Nie Mingjue couldn't help a smile of wry sympathy. Because yeah, he got it. Bad enough that the kid was dead. Ghosts hanging around was supposed to be a bad thing. But there was definitely something satisfying about the thought of Xue Yang's victim getting to take active part in taking him out.

"Wei Wuxian's willing to help you if his skills will be useful, and honestly, I'd like you to talk to him anyway; he needs a proper orientation to the way the law works now." His lips twitched. "Fair warning, though: so far as he cares, Xue Yang needs to come down with a

severe case of *dead*. Wei Wuxian's provisionally willing to step back and trust us to handle the guy. But If Xue Yang tries anything, Wei Wuxian's likely to play his *whoops, forgot what century it was* card, take the stabbity solution to the problem, and leave the questioning for the corpse."

Song Lan muttered something that sounded suspiciously like *I have no problem with this plan*, drawing a look of amused chiding from Xiao Xingchen. Which, fair. This was the *other* reason why Nie Mingjue hadn't wanted to go for law enforcement. At least in the army, if a bad guy tried to kill you, it was generally acceptable to kill him back!

Then Xiao Xingchen blinked, a bemused look on his face. "Is asking questions of the dead actually a viable option?" he asked.

"You'd have to ask Wei Wuxian," Nie Mingjue admitted, because yeah, he could see why a police detective would be *really* interested in that possibility. "He hasn't said much about the specifics of how it works, at least not to me."

Not that he blamed the guy. Nie Mingjue could definitely see why Wei Wuxian would be inclined to keep the fact that he had access to invisible informants close to the chest, at least long enough to chat some ghosts up and make sure the living people were actually playing straight with him.

Song Lan raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything, just nodded – probably thinking something along the same lines.

Xiao Xingchen smiled. "We'll have to ask him, then. In the meantime, let's make sure we have everything in order to hand Xue Yang off to the task force. Then… since we'll be helping you regardless, I would appreciate going over your investigation so far…"

Given, well, *everything*, Wen Yuan was not at all surprised when the first thing Lan Jingyi did was give him a *massive*, hey-I-need-those-ribs bear hug.

Given everything, he was *also* not surprised when the next thing Lan Jingyi did was punch him in the arm.

"Ow," Wen Yuan said mildly, rubbing his arm. At least Lan Jingyi had pulled it, so he wasn't too mad…

Or maybe it was just that all the meditation he'd been doing was yielding results, because that was a scowl that would impress Jin Ling. "I can't *believe* you actually jumped in front of some psycho with a freaking *gun*!" Lan Jingyi fumed, somehow putting all the force of proper shouting into it without actually raising his voice.

Wen Yuan crossed his arms. "He was going to *shoot* Wei Wuxian when Wei Wuxian wasn't even *doing* anything!" he said stubbornly – although he kept his voice down, too. There wasn't be anyone around to overhear them that he could see, but they were standing outside the administration building in the open, he'd rather be careful.

Lan Jingyi huffed. “Yeah, I saw the video and you were *super* cool and all that, but stupid impulsive stuff is supposed to be *my* thing!”

Wen Yuan had to laugh a little at that. “Sorry,” he said with a grin – although he did actually mean it. He hadn’t actually worked up the nerve to watch the security recording himself yet, but it had to have been a shock. “I just… couldn’t do *nothing*, you know?”

That got him a snort. “Of course you couldn’t, you’re *you*,” Lan Jingyi said dryly. Then he hit Wen Yuan in the shoulder again, although this time it was more a knuckle-and-shove than an actual punch. “Seriously, how have you been sitting smack in the middle of a freaking *superhero origin story* and you *didn’t say anything*?!”

Wen Yuan groaned, covering his face with his hands. “You have *no*. Idea! We’d be on chat and you and Ouyang Zizhen would start throwing around theories about Yiling Laozu and I’m sitting there thinking *I just spent an hour teaching him to play video games and then losing to him*! I almost lost my tongue, I was biting it so hard!” Then he looked through his fingers at Lan Jingyi, amused. “Also: superhero origin story? Really?”

“Well, come on!” Lan Jingyi smirked. “Guy with magic powers from a bygone age wakes up in the modern world? The movie practically writes itself! You’ve even got the shadowy bad guys.”

You’ve been talking to Ouyang Zizhen too much, was what Wen Yuan meant to say. What came out instead was, “I could really do without the last part.”

Lan Jingyi winced, suddenly sobering. “Yeah,” he admitted. “Me too. Lan Qiren told us about some of what happened, and… I’m gonna be honest. That was pretty scary stuff.”

Wen Yuan swallowed. “Yeah. I’m really glad nothing worse happened.” He looked at Lan Jingyi. “So… what did your mom decide? About the director’s offer?”

His friend puffed his cheeks. “She’s not so worried about herself or Dad,” he said. “They’re grownups, they’ve got jobs and stuff that they can’t just *drop*, and, well… they think they’re probably not at that much of a risk.”

“What about you?”

Lan Jingyi hesitated, sliding a sideways look at him. “She wants me to stay up here for now,” he admitted. “Which means I’ll be staying with you at Professor Lan’s place, right?”

Wen Yuan nodded. “Are you okay with that?” he asked. “We’ve got pretty good security, yeah… but we were also the targets.”

That brought out a truly impressive scowl. “And that is *so* beyond not okay…!” Catching himself, Lan Jingyi drew in a deep, deep breath, held it, and then let it go in one giant huff and shook his head. “Yeah, I’m okay with it. I mean, as long as you are?”

Wen Yuan tried not to grin *too* widely. He didn’t want Lan Jingyi to suspect anything. “I’m good. Do you need to go get your things?”

Lan Jingyi shook his head, starting to walk in the direction of the stairs to the old monastic complex. “Mom’s going to pack my stuff and send it up later,” he said, as if it were perfectly normal for a seventeen year old boy to be okay with his mother going through his things. Then again, Lan Jingyi had always seemed to sort of low-key assume that his mother was omniscient anyway. Having met her, Wen Yuan wasn’t entirely sure he was wrong.

As they walked, Lan Jingyi snickered. “I’m just sorry I won’t be there when she tells Dad what’s going on. Think I can get her to do it on video call so I can see his face?” His eyes widened. “Oh *man*. *Please* tell me you recorded Ouyang Zizhen’s reaction when you told him! I bet he practically ascended!”

Wen Yuan winced. “Actually, with everything that’s been happening… We’re not putting the video anywhere on the internet, and no one’s going to *believe* this without it. So… right now, we’re only telling people in person.”

Lan Jingyi blinked, then grimaced in understanding. “Ow. Yeah, I guess that would be a thing, wouldn’t it? You’ve already got the shady scheming bad guys, last thing you need is some hacker live-streaming a video call onto the internet.” Then his eyes widened. “So… the other guys don’t *know* yet?”

Wen Yuan held off on answering until they’d gotten past the relatively crowded area around the dining hall – and then until they finished the climb up the stairs leading to the old complex. There were times he really sympathized with Nie Huaisang’s theatrical complaints about accessibility and how not *every* day should have to be leg day. Wei Wuxian’s laughing comments that the stairs used to be even *longer* were downright terrifying, even if they did make sense. He’d visited enough historic mountain temples and watch posts to understand that sometimes accessibility was the opposite of what those places were designed for.

And he supposed that when the inhabitants were a bunch of super-athlete cultivators who could just hop on a sword and *fly*, accessibility probably wasn’t a concern anyway. Although he felt *really* sorry for the non-cultivators who had to live there!

Once they’d gotten to the historic complex – and he was sure no one was walking close enough to overhear them – he picked up the thread of the conversation again. “The big announcement is this evening,” he said. “I already sent them a video call invite for it.”

It was happening kind of terrifyingly fast, after weeks and weeks of knowing it had to happen but it was always in the vague hazy realm of *eventually*. But he did get why. They needed to jump on this before whoever sent those guys did something else.

At least, with everything suddenly happening all at once, he was too busy just keeping up to get the jitters over it!

Lan Jingyi cackled. “Oh man, I can’t *wait* to see their faces! Ouyang Zizhen nothing, *Jin Ling* is gonna…” Suddenly his mouth snapped closed, a dozen expressions flickering across his face in rapid succession before he winced. “Oh man,” he breathed, with none of his previous enthusiasm. “That’s gonna be a mess, isn’t it? I mean, he was already going all sour grapes about missing out when he thought this was just studying a dead body.”

Wen Yuan's shoulders slumped. "Yeah," he agreed, desperately glad he finally had someone who *got* this. "And it's so *frustrating*, because I really, really want Jin Ling to meet Wei Wuxian!"

Lan Jingyi eyed him. "Really?"

Wen Yuan grinned. "Wei Wuxian would take one look at Jin Ling and adopt him on the *spot*. It would be hilarious and adorable and I *need that in my life*." And he thought Jin Ling needed it, too, not that he'd ever admit it.

Lan Jingyi blinked. "Huh." He considered that. "Think there's a chance we could leverage his grandfather's whole evil politiciany-ness for the forces of good for once?"

"…maybe?" On the one hand, the last thing Jin Ling needed was Jin Guangshan meddling in Jin Ling's business even more than he already had. On the other hand… the results might actually be worth it. Not that he had any idea *how* they could pull something like that off, anyway.

Then again, even odds *they* wouldn't have to do anything except argue Jin Ling's case, because he really doubted Jin Guangshan would ignore a potential in like that.

Lan Jingyi was quiet for way too long long after that, and Wen Yuan waited patiently, because he had a pretty good idea of what was going through his friend's head.

Finally, Lan Jingyi asked, *way* too casually to be believable, "Sooo… does that mean I'll get to meet Wei Wuxian sometime?"

Wen Yuan nodded and did not smirk even the tiniest little bit. "Definitely," he said. "Professor Lan and I work with him pretty much every day." He shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Honestly… it sucks that it's happening like this, but I'm glad he'll get to start meeting people outside the project. There's only so much he can get to know about the modern world when we have to hide the fact that he even exists!"

"That… makes sense, I guess," Lan Jingyi said slowly. "So… what's he like, then?"

Wen Yuan had to laugh. "Picture the most unholy awesome mix of Dad Vibes and Cool Older Brother energy, and you're pretty close."

"…huh." From the look on Lan Jingyi's face, he was having trouble wrapping his brain around that. Which was fine; Wen Yuan had gotten home that first night and spent way longer than he wanted to admit staring blankly at the wall and trying to figure out when reality had taken a hard left turn on him. "So… not really the stern proud lord type?" he asked.

"Think more Trickster Mentor and Guile Hero," Wen Yuan suggested, amused. Because, yeah, he knew that the Yiling Laozu fanbase had invented every personality under the sun for the man in the ice, but in general they did sort of tend to the distant and noble archetypes.

Lan Jingyi shook his head. "Oh man… Trickster Mentor? Can you imagine what it would be like if he was willing to *teach* people how to do that?"

Wen Yuan waited to catch Lan Jingyi's eye… and smiled. Slow, satisfied, and *toothy*.

Lan Jingyi's eyes bugged. "No way…"

"Way," Wen Yuan said smugly. Because seriously, he'd been waiting *weeks* to brag about this!

And then he went for the coup de grace. "If you're game, I think he'd enjoy having another student."

This time, Lan Jingyi actually tripped over his own feet, and only saved himself from falling by grabbing at Wen Yuan's shoulder. "Wen Yuan, if you are just screwing with me…!"

"I'm not." Teasing abandoned, Wen Yuan gave his friend his most fiercely earnest look. "Jingyi, he *likes* teaching. Apparently he did it a lot, before he ended up in the ice. I didn't even ask him to start teaching me, he just started correcting my meditation form because I wasn't circulating my qi right."

Lan Jingyi took a few minutes to absorb that. Wen Yuan didn't push him, just kept walking and doing his best to keep his friend from walking right off the path in his distraction. "… What's it like?"

"*Hard*," Wen Yuan told him bluntly. "But also amazing. I'm still just learning to *notice* qi, but even that…" He shook his head, at a loss for the words to describe the dizzying feeling of knowing, *knowing*, that the way he looked at the world was never going to be the same again. Because even if he never actually achieved anything like what Wei Wuxian could, now he knew it was *possible*... and he'd taken the first step towards it.

Lan Jingyi chewed his lip. "You know I'm not you, Wen Yuan," he said.

"I know," Wen Yuan agreed. And he liked that about Lan Jingyi, the fact that for all that his friend *did* work hard, he'd also taken a conscious look at the way his classmates poured themselves into competition for rankings and decided *nah, not for me*. "I don't think it will be a problem. Wei Wuxian is always poking me about not trying to do things exactly like Professor Lan."

Lan Jingyi's eyes almost popped out of his head. "Wait. *Professor Lan* is doing cultivation class, too?" When Wen Yuan nodded, Lan Jingyi stared into the distance for a moment. "Wow. And I thought he *couldn't* get any cooler…"

Wen Yuan hid a chuckle. With everything going on, he'd sort of forgotten about the fact that Lan Jingyi thought Lan Wangji was the coolest person *ever*.

Granted, he wasn't wrong. Although there was definitely some stiff competition now.

"You can always give it a try," he suggested. "I doubt Wei Wuxian would be upset if it just didn't work for you. But… I think you'd like it. And he's really *good* at teaching."

Lan Jingyi eyed him as they walked up to the Jingshi at last. "Really?"

Stepping inside, Wen Yuan laughed ruefully. “He really, really is. I’m teaching *him* physics and somehow he *still* manages to tutor me on my homework!”

“Huh.” Lan Jingyi blinked. “Think he’d do that for me, too?” he asked, apparently fully serious. Then again, Lan Jingyi *hated* physics.

Wen Yuan glanced around briefly. Lan Wangji wasn’t waiting for them in the main room, so he was probably still stuck in his meeting with the main project reviewing their research proposals. So…

Grinning, Wen Yuan walked out onto the veranda. “Why not come ask him yourself?” he called over his shoulder.

“Eh? Wen Yuan, what are you talking abou*hhrrrk*.”

Wei Wuxian grinned and waved from where he was sitting in the lotus position on one of the big rocks in the middle of the pond – it was one of his preferred spots for meditating, something about the flow of qi in the air and water. Wen Yuan was nowhere near sensitive enough to get the difference yet, not to mention that he had no way of getting there without getting *wet*. “A’Yuan! Did your friend decide to stay with us, then?”

“Yep!” Wen Yuan said brightly, gleefully cataloging the *amazing* variety of half-strangled noises coming from behind him.

“*Wen Yuan, I am going to kill you!*” Lan Jingyi finally managed to choke out in a whisper.

“*Worth it!*” Wen Yuan singsonged back under his breath, but he kept his eyes on Wei Wuxian hopefully. *C’mon, c’mon…*

Wei Wuxian tilted an eyebrow at him, a tiny hint of a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. Yeah, he knew exactly what Wen Yuan was up to.

He was also *Wei Wuxian*. So he obligingly bounced to his feet and casually strolled over to say hello.

Across the surface of the pond. As you do.

The face Lan Jingyi made was *perfect.*

Lan Wangji could not help the amused thought that he’d never seen the excitable boy quite so thoroughly tongue-tied before. Which was impressive, given the level of hero worship Lan Jingyi frequently displayed towards Lan Wangji himself – which, yes, he was aware of, although for the sake of the boy’s dignity he had never actually acknowledged it as such. But apparently meeting a *real live cultivator* engendered hitherto unmatched levels of starstruck awe.

Of course, it didn’t last long; Wei Wuxian’s skill with teenagers was apparently not limited to relatively mature ones like Wen Yuan. Not so surprising, now that Lan Wangji knew that Wei

Wuxian had been closely involved with training the Jiang disciples, and by all accounts enjoyed it immensely. He was likely good with children of all ages—

Lan Wangji came to a sudden stop, blinking. Because his mind had just offered a mental image of Wei Wuxian surrounded by small children and suddenly he wanted nothing more than to see that scene in real life.

“Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji shook himself from his thoughts and realized that he had stopped directly in the doorway, blocking Wei Wuxian’s work. “Apologies,” he said, stepping through to deposit the load of spare bedding he was carrying on the bed of the guest room; Lan Jingyi and Wen Yuan were still setting up the air mattress that Wen Yuan had previously been using in the main room. With the addition of Lan Jingyi, it no longer made sense for the boys to stay in the main room, so Wei Wuxian was giving them the guest room.

Lan Wangji had to admit that he was also not particularly comfortable with the teenagers staying in the public room anymore, after the attempted kidnapping. Not that the guest room was really any more secure… at least under normal circumstances.

Lan Jingyi, he noted with amusement, was too busy staring at what Wei Wuxian was doing to be much help with the mattress. “Are those *wards*?” he finally blurted, obviously giving up on biting the curiosity back. “Like, really for real wards?” Next to him, Wen Yuan was grinning broadly, clearly far too entertained by Lan Jingyi’s reactions to care that it left him doing the lion’s share of the work.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, finishing the last character with a flick of his brush. “Yes, really for real,” he said, openly amused, and Lan Wangji allowed himself a moment to be grateful that the language exposure Wei Wuxian had gotten from A’Qing had already stabilized his speech patterns, because Lan Jingyi had a distinctly more casual style than would be appropriate. “Want to take a look?”

Lan Jingyi opened his mouth to answer – and then hesitated, eyeing Wen Yuan’s grin suspiciously. “Just checking, but it’s safe, right? This isn’t some thing where I look at it wrong and my head asplode or anything?”

Wei Wuxian snorted. “Slander!” he cried in mock-offense, before reaching over and patting Lan Jingyi on the head. “No asploding – except maybe from too much learning, the poor thing is *clearly* overworked!”

Lan Jingyi spluttered with indignation, ducking away and covering his head defensively. “Hey! I’m not Wen Yuan, but I’m not an idiot!”

Wei Wuxian raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Asplode,” he said pointedly.

Wen Yuan had nearly fallen over laughing, but he came gamely to his friend’s rescue. “That’s actually a meme thing,” he explained.

Wei Wuxian eyed him. “I *am* going to get you to explain what that means sooner or later,” he said ominously.

The boys exchanged looks that were equal parts dread and glee. Lan Wangji sympathized. Part of being an accomplished junzi was the artful incorporation of classical references into all modes of conversation. Take that training and introduce meme culture? Wei Wuxian would be a *menace* and he would enjoy every second of it. Fortunately for the sanity of the world – for now – Wei Wuxian dropped the subject with a chuckle, waving Lan Jingyi over to take a closer look at the symbols painted on the lintel of the door.

Lan Wangji watched Wei Wuxian’s mischievous smile as Lan Jingyi rambled and gesticulated with a feeling of warm amusement. As well as fascination. Sometimes he forgot that Wei Wuxian was closer in age to the boys than to Lan Wangji; there was a *certainty* to Wei Wuxian, a confidence in his own knowledge of himself, that Lan Wangji associated with his own peers. Even Wei Wuxian’s silly streak reflected it; Lan Wangji knew from *painful* personal experience that the confidence to be ridiculous demanded far more genuine maturity than maintaining a veneer of dignity.

And then there were the times when he was *acutely* aware of the fact that Wei Wuxian was for all intents and purposes *ten years younger than he was*. Usually involving those damned jeans.

At least Wei Wuxian didn’t wear them much; he’d admitted that he didn’t like the way they restricted his mobility. And Wei Wuxian still preferred tops that extended below his hips. But Lan Wangji wasn’t quite sure how he was going to survive the *other* aspect of Wei Wuxian giving the guest bedroom over to the boys.

At least Lan Wangji had been able to use the time while Wei Wuxian was updating the wards to collect anything potentially… *incriminating* and hide it away in storage with the winter things. Because while Wei Wuxian had been courteous about leaving Lan Wangji his private space, he *would* investigate everything once invited in. The man was like a cat, constitutionally incapable of *not* exploring things.

Lan Wangji had to laugh to himself at that, because he could very much picture Wei Wuxian as a cat. Especially an Abyssinian or a Siamese: sociable, athletic, playful, chatty, infinitely curious, and inclined to climb on things.

Watching Wei Wuxian with the boys, though, was a striking reminder that, yes, Wei Wuxian was a young man barely into his twenties, but he was also an adult in terms of mindset and worldview and bearing in a way that few of Lan Wangji’s own peers could match.

It was also interesting from a teaching perspective. With Wen Yuan, Wei Wuxian had focused on laying out the underlying structure of how the ward was constructed, breaking it down into component parts. His conversation with Lan Jingyi was far more focused on matters of application – where wards could be set, why there, what effects could be produced. Much more practical than theoretical…

Granted, it wasn’t surprising that Wei Wuxian also understood the inherent appeal of Stuff Goes Boom to teenage boys.

The display on the clock on the desk – rescued from where Wei Wuxian had ignominiously shoved it into a drawer when his patience for the modern world's obsession with glowing displays had reached a limit, early in his stay – caught his eye, and he stepped forward slightly. "A'Yuan. The time."

Pulling the last corner of the sheet onto the air mattress, Wen Yuan looked at the clock and yelped. "The announcement! It's going to be in half an hour!"

Lan Jingyi's eyes widened. "Oh sh…shoot, I was going to call my mom – and you've got the video chat ready to go, right?"

Wei Wuxian chuckled, easily moving aside as the boys rushed past him, on the hunt for the electronics that they'd left in the main room. "Well, the wards are stable, at least!" he told Lan Wangji as they stepped out of the guest room. "We can fix them later, if we need to."

"Do you think it will be?" Lan Wangji asked, leading the way to his own room.

Wei Wuxian hummed, tapping his lip thoughtfully. "Maybe?" He shrugged. "It will help when I know what sort of things to ward against. Right now, I'm mostly using wards against unwanted people coming in. There are wards to prevent spying, but I don't know if that would cause problems for your ghost voices!"

Lan Wangji gave him a *look*. Wei Wuxian just grinned at him.

Still, that raised an interesting question. "Wards work on machinery and electronics?"

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Well, I haven't tried it much. But the cameras in the lab? I didn't know what was watching, but I knew I was being watched!"

Interesting. Lan Wangji wasn't surprised to hear that Wei Wuxian had set wards in the lab – now that he knew such things were possible, it made sense for him to do so. But that wards meant to detect spies could detect automated security cameras with no human eyes watching the feed – that was intriguing. And not necessarily what he would have predicted given what he understood of the theory…

"Oh." Wei Wuxian had skipped ahead of him. Now the man stood in the doorway to the bedroom, blinking. "You already set it up? You didn't have to do that! I would have helped!"

"You were helping the boys. It was not difficult." Lan Wangji watched as Wei Wuxian investigated the new arrangement. Lan Wangji had thought of bringing in just a simple cot and offering to sleep on that… but he already knew that Wei Wuxian would never agree to displacing Lan Wangji from his bed, and he refused to make Wei Wuxian make do for however long the arrangement might last. So he'd arranged for a second bed from the university surplus, as well as a chest to hold Wei Wuxian's still limited wardrobe.

His libido's suggestion of *sharing* his bed was unwanted and unnecessary and would not be considered.

Wei Wuxian huffed as he closed the lid of the clothes chest, and then glanced at the privacy screen dividing the room in two. “You know, somehow a blank screen just doesn’t suit you.”

No. For all his spartan living style, Lan Wangji did believe it was important to include things of beauty and elegance in one’s surroundings. Which was why he’d chosen to leave the room divider blank. “You are an artist.”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “That’s dangerous, you know. I might paint something ridiculous!”

“I will trust your taste.”

Wei Wuxian spluttered. “Lan Zhaaan!” he complained. “*Warn* me when you’re going to be so sincere!”

“Sincerity is important in all things,” he said serenely, and did not smirk at the theatrical protests.

Wei Wuxian huffed at him, but the man was already eyeing the screen thoughtfully. “You really want me to paint it?” he asked thoughtfully.

Thoughtfully, and with something soft in his tone that Lan Wangji abruptly realized he was *not* ready for. “Perhaps not tonight,” he admitted, casting about desperately for a change of subject.

That got a sharp laugh. “No, I think there’s quite enough going on tonight!” Wei Wuxian agreed.

Ah. He’d almost forgotten. “Do you wish to watch the announcement?” Lan Wangji asked. He was inclined not to – the world would descend on them soon enough, a last peaceful evening would be welcome. But he would understand if Wei Wuxian wanted to see how they were presenting his story.

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Actually, Nie Mingjue has asked me for a favor this evening.”

Lan Wangji blinked. A favor?

“He’s *cool*.”

Logging into his laptop, Wen Yuan blinked at Lan Jingyi, before smiling in wry amusement.

Lan Jingyi huffed at him from where he lay sprawled inelegantly across the air mattress. “Yes, I know, he’s a *cultivator*, that’s already like a million coolness points right there,” he grumbled, waving his hand in the air. He was still holding his phone in the other, having just hung up after his short check-in call to his parents. “But Wei Wuxian’s also just… *cool*. You know?”

Wen Yuan had to nod, because… well, yeah. He *did* know. Wei Wuxian was like Lan Wangji that way. When you talked to him, he *listened*. And he didn’t talk down to them for being

teenagers or not knowing something.

Granted, if they did something stupid it would be a different story!

After a moment, Lan Jingyi propped himself up on his elbows. “So… when you said that he’d be willing to teach *me* that stuff. You really think so? You’re not just pulling my leg?”

Wen Yuan considered complaining about the lack of faith… but honestly, he’d been *doing* cultivation for weeks now and he *still* couldn’t quite believe it was real. So, yeah. He got where Lan Jingyi was coming from.

So he just nodded. “I’m not kidding about it being hard, though,” he warned. “And there’s a lot of meditating, especially early on, when you’re figuring out what qi even *feels* like.”

“Well, yeah, I kind of figured,” Lan Jingyi admitted. “I mean, that sort of thing is *always* part of cultivating, in the shows *and* the whole weird old philosophy stuff. But hey, if it gets me to walking on water and *flying swords*, I can do meditating!”

Wen Yuan eyed him with amusement. “And seeing ghosts?” he asked teasingly. “That’s part of it too, you know.”

Lan Jingyi shuddered, hugging his pillow. “Yes, but now that I know ghosts are actually real *anyway*, I’d rather get the mad skillz so I can deal with them!” he complained.

And then blinked. “So if ghosts are real, what about yao and stuff?”

“I’m not sure,” Wen Yuan admitted. “He hasn’t talked about them with me, but some of the things he’s said to Professor Lan…”

Lan Jingyi groaned, flopping back on the air mattress again. “Great. I’m never going to be able to visit the Three Gorges Dam again without wondering if the monster in the lake is about to snack on me.” He paused, blinking at the ceiling. “Wei Wuxian and Professor Lan seem to get along really well, don’t they? Not sure I’d have expected that.”

When Wen Yuan didn’t answer immediately, Lan Jingyi narrowed his eyes at him. “Okay, you’re wearing your *thoughts* face. Spill.”

Wen Yuan smiled ruefully. “It’s kind of silly?”

“Wen Yuan, you are probably the *least* silly person I know except for Professor Lan himself. Spill!”

Wen Yuan looked at his hands where they rested on his keyboard. Truth be told, a part of him was scared to actually say it, like the little glimpses of *possibly maybe* would pop like bubbles if he put it into words… but he also really, *desperately* wanted to share it with someone. “You know how we joke about how Professor Lan is basically my dad?”

Lan Jingyi nodded solemnly, face serious – because he knew just how much Wen Yuan wanted it to *not* be a joke. It wasn’t anything against Wen Qing or Wen Ning; they were awesome, and they’d really stepped up to help after his grandmother died, even though

neither of them had been in a good position to take on responsibility for a kid. It was just that he and Lan Wangji just… *clicked* with each other.

Wen Yuan bit his lip, fidgeting with the mouse – and then said in a rush, "I'm hoping that if things go well, I'll get *two* awesome dads."

Lan Jingyi blinked, and then his eyes widened as Wen Yuan's meaning sank in. "Really? You think so? I thought Professor Lan didn't date – like, *ever*!"

"I mean, he doesn't," Wen Yuan admitted. The only reason he even knew his mentor wasn't straight or just flat-out not into *anything* was because Lan Wangji had told him, back when he was fourteen and had just gotten The Sex Talk from his relatives. "That's why I think he's interested. I've never seen him as *focused* on someone the way he is with Wei Wuxian, and I don't think that's just because of this whole… *thing*." He waved his hand.

Lan Jingyi pursed his lips. "Huh. Yeah, I see what you mean." He grinned wryly. "And hey, he actually found someone who's good enough for him!" He leaned forward. "So… do you think Wei Wuxian's interested?"

Wen Yuan slumped back in his chair. "I don't know," he admitted. "I think he might be? But he's also just kind of *like that*. Even with Aunt Qing, and I'm definitely sure he's not interested in her."

"Well, if he's not interested in her, that's a good sign," Lan Jingyi pointed out stoutly. "She's hot."

"*Jingyi!*"

"Well, she *is*," Lan Jingyi said unrepentantly. "But yeah. Not interested one way isn't the same as interested in the other."

"And other than Aunt Qing, Professor Lan's the only grownup he's really spent any time with," Wen Yuan admitted. "So… it *feels* like he… I don't know. *Trusts* Professor Lan, I guess. But he also *had* to do that for so long anyway…"

Lan Jingyi made a face. "Ow. Yeah, that makes it harder," he admitted. "And even if he *was* interested… it wasn't really okay back in his time, right? You could get into some really nasty trouble. Worse than today."

"I'm not sure," Wen Yuan said honestly – because yes, he'd done a little research on the side. The results had been frustratingly inconclusive. "I think a lot of the harsher stuff actually came later? It's more just that it was a thing that didn't get talked about."

Lan Jingyi frowned, considering that, and then shrugged. "Maybe we can come up with a sneaky way to just *ask* and save some time," he suggested. "Plus, the whole thing about not getting to meet people was because you had to be careful who you told, right? Now that the project is going public, he'll have more chances to meet people! And that will be *data*," he concluded stoutly.

Wen Yuan snickered in spite of himself. “You *hate* data-gathering projects,” he said, amused.

Lan Jingyi huffed. “That’s because the stuff they have us do in school is all, *go out and do this thing that will lead you to the foregone conclusion that I’ve predetermined*. This is different!”

Chuckling, Wen Yuan looked at his computer, and blinked. “Oh. Ouyang Zizhen and Jin Ling are logging in.”

Lan Jingyi glanced at the clock and swallowed when he saw that it was five minutes until the hour. “Oh man,” he breathed, climbing to his feet. “I guess it’s showtime…”

OMAKE SCENE

(*Because this doesn’t actually fit the tone of the fic at all, but it was too amusing to leave out. And because Nie Huaisang would* absolutely *go there.*)

Nie Mingjue had walked onto friendlier battlefields. While under enemy fire.

Drawing in a deep breath, he stepped up to the microphone and looked out at a whole conference hall full of distinctly hostile faces. Not exactly a surprise; he’d probably thrown more than a few of them politely out of the campus when they’d tried to wander places they weren’t permitted, back before Lan Qiren had brought down the threat of legal consequences if the protesters harassed university students or faculty.

Which is why you’re here. They know *you’re a legitimate representative of the university.*

Not to mention the one with the best odds of getting through this with his skin intact. Although *best odds* didn’t mean they were odds he *liked*.

Deep breaths. You have a plan in place.

“I’ve brought an announcement by project director Lan Qiren,” he calmly, refusing to let the hostile audience rattle him. “Please watch the video in full. There will be a press conference in three days’ time; the director asks that you withhold questions until that time.”

And pigs would fly, but hopefully the dangling carrot of the chance to ask questions *officially* would keep the flying pigs to a couple lone mavericks rather than a squadron of bombers. So to speak.

Nie Mingjue stepped back as the lights dimmed and the first part of Lan Qiren’s recorded message started playing, saying pretty much what he just had – that the video they were about to see was taken directly from security camera footage, after which he would explain the current situation, requests for further clarification were to be presented at the upcoming press conference.

It seemed unnecessarily theatrical to Nie Mingjue, but he supposed that was what they got for taking stage directions from Nie Huaisang.

And the theater did have one key advantage – which was that with everyone's attention on the video, no one noticed him slip through the side door and out into the hallway.

Then, because he was not stupid, he *ran like hell*.

But for the stairs, not the door.

He took the steps two at a time, counting the seconds in his head. The video itself wasn't exactly long, just a minute or three at most. Hopefully the shock would keep everyone in their seats through the second part of Lan Qiren's recording, where he gave a fairly general account of how they'd been working on keeping Wei Wuxian safe while he acclimated, all very laudable stuff with just enough references to problems to make the project leaders look good by contrast…

He hit the exit onto the roof just as the muffled sound of Lan Qiren's voice ended, and he'd never been so glad to see a ride in his *life*.

"Alright, that's done, let's get out of here!" he muttered, quickly jumping up to stand in front of Wei Wuxian on the blade of the sword. And under any other circumstances he would be whooping with glee because *getaway by flying sword*, he'd never pretended *not* to have a thrill-seeking streak, but right now his ears were full of the ominous silence from the conference room below, because it was all well and good to say *hold your questions until the press conference*, but if the convention decided to descend on the university en masse he had *no* idea how they would handle it without things getting ugly…

He was listening so hard for the first rumbling of a forming mob that he heard every word when his little brother's voice – what the *hells* was Nie Huaisang doing in there?! – broke the stunned silence.

"Sooo… does this mean YLLZ fic is actually RPF?"

Nie Mingjue blanched.

Oh. That was what the hells he was doing.

"Get us out of here," he said numbly. "You do not want to see the bloodbath he just unleashed."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Wei Wuxian's baffled expression as the sword carried them up to vanish into the shadowy evening sky beyond the reach of the city lights. "Should I ask what that meant?"

"Absolutely not," Nie Mingjue said fervently, cursing his brother's love of fandom drama. "Believe me, this is one of those cases where ignorance really is bliss…"

OMAKE:

LJY: “How exciting can a dead guy be, anyway?”

WWX: *antennae sproing!* “What’s this? I sense a *challenge*!”

NMJ: Dammit, I did not sign up for politics!

Authorial wail: *Neither did I!*

NOTES:

…so the last scene with Nie Mingjue doesn’t really fit the rest of the story. But I just *had* to throw it in there just for funsies, because it was one of the very early scene bunnies that bit me for this idea! (Yes, I often have silly or non-sequitur bunnies that never actually make it into the main fic, it’s often a good way to feel out characters.) And, come on, Nie Huaisang would *absolutely* throw that question about RPF into the fray and then stand back and watch the bloody mayhem…

So consider it only quasi-canon at best, and enjoy the giggles.

(And, yes, I knew going into this that politics would have to be a Thing, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to use every trick I can to keep most of it at arm’s length!)

Writing Mo Xuanyu is weirdly fun. Although I do have to be careful, because outside of a vanishingly small handful of tidbits, many of which are suspect, we actually know next to nothing about the man. You can basically write him anywhere from a Cinderella pushed to the breaking point to a lower-key Xue Yang… which is what makes him tricky. In essence, he will always be an OC with a canon identity. So I try not to overuse him… but in this fic, bunnies had a use for including the only other canonically gay character, so I already knew he played a minor role. So the bunnies felt free to tap him for other things… and the minute they declared he was the source of Wei Wuxian’s first modern clothes, I knew there had to be a reaction shot where he found out *who* the clothes were for!

Fun fact: the more than a few states from the Sixteen Kingdoms period (basically a sub-period of the overall disunified era) left basically no historical record of their own; what we have are records pieced together by Tang historians over two hundred years later. This is *not* actually the case for the Liang dynasty that Mo Xuanyu references; most of the states with scant records were ruled by formerly nomadic people who didn’t always adopt Chinese bureaucracy, or flat-out last long enough to leave many records. Not to mention that the Liang dynasty was after the Sixteen Kingdoms. But as a precedent? It works very nicely for my purposes…

As for historical homophobia… as Wen Yuan noted, it's not entirely clear what attitudes were towards homosexuality in the period I'm using for Wei Wuxian's original time. However, the society of the *novel* absolutely has homophobic attitudes, so…

With regard to Wei Wuxian snooping in the Jingshi in canon: note that he only does so *after* Lan Wangji invites him in (cough has him dragged there *literally* kicking and screaming cough). And he has motivation to snoop – first because he's trying to find one of the tokens to escape, and second because Lan Wangji is *different* and he's trying to figure out what changed.

And yes, Wei Wuxian does in fact understand how politics work. He knows *exactly* what Jin Guangshan is up to, from the start. The trick is that, first, he does not have any political *power* to actually put his knowledge into effect, and the one ally he has who does, Jiang Cheng, is both *not* very savvy and easily turned against him. (Lan Wangji never acts as an ally, not until after Wei Wuxian has already been forced past the point of no return – and in fact, Lan Wangji *also* has no real power in politics without Lan Xichen's support, and it's clear that Lan Xichen is not supporting him whenever he does try speaking out.) And the other thing is that Wei Wuxian is not willing to sacrifice his morals for political convenience.

Regarding maturity… Wei Wuxian is physically in his early twenties to Lan Wangji's mid-thirties, but they're basically peers, because Wei Wuxian has *lived* more than his years would suggest. Which rather fits canon, where Lan Wangji needed an extra thirteen years to catch up!

Okay, not really; I suspect Lan Wangji's real growth happened with Nightless City and Wei Wuxian's death and all the things he had to confront in the process. But I do think that even as far back as the Cloud Recesses arc, Wei Wuxian has an edge on Lan Wangji when it comes to moral maturity.

Don't get me wrong; in Cloud Recesses, Wei Wuxian is *absolutely* a stupid teenager who does stupid teenage things. He is pulling pigtails and being in every way an obnoxious fifteen-year-old trying to get the attention of his crush. Then again, *Lan Wangji* is handling his crush through petulant sulking, outright rudeness, and lashing out with a lethal weapon, so. And while Wei Wuxian's general behavior fits the stereotypical teenage boy… something that often gets overlooked is that Lan Wangji's self-conscious dignity is equally juvenile. He's *presenting* himself as grown-up and mature compared to his peers, but all you have to do is compare it to the way the fully grown Lan Wangji carries himself, and it's very obvious just how brittle the young Lan Wangji's veneer actually is. He's just presenting himself in a way the adults around him value, rather than his peers.

But I think the core difference between them is summed up in something Wei Wuxian says to Lan Wangji during the Caiyi night hunt: *"Don't you ever think in anything but straight lines?*"

No. Baby Lan Wangji doesn't. In his head, there is *right* and there is *wrong*. There is *good* and there is *bad*. There is a *right answer* and a *right way to do things* and if you are *properly* educated, then you will do things that way. The world is neat and orderly and everything fits in its box.

Lan Wangji is a *good kid*. He genuinely cares about doing the right thing. But he starts out thinking it's not enough to do *right* or *good* – you have to do it in *the proper way* or it doesn't count.

Which leads to a cognitive dissonance that – in my opinion – starts on that very hunt, where he's forced to face the fact that troublemaking Wei Wuxian is not only skilled, but in fact reacted faster than *Lan Wangji himself* to save the stranded Lan disciple. And he doesn't really come to terms with it until Nightless City, where he's forced to confront that sometimes there is no right answer, only the one that your conscience allows.

By contrast, even in the Cloud Recesses arc Wei Wuxian is asking *why*. Why is this true? Why *should* I follow the rules when the people in charge blatantly do not? Why is *this* thing righteous and *that* thing not? He's not relying on outside dictates for his sense of right and wrong. Which ultimately grows into what he tells Lan Wangji in the Burial Mounds:

"What can I do apart from this? […] Give them up? I won't be able to do it. I believe that if you were I, you wouldn't be able to do it either. […] Let the self judge the right and the wrong, let others decide to praise or to blame, let gains and losses remain uncommented on. I know what I should and shouldn't do."

"Let the rest of the world say what they want. I choose to do what is right."

I honestly think that's the moment that first really lays out Lan Wangji's struggle, because what Wei Wuxian is saying goes against everything he grew up believing, that he *wants* to believe… but he can't say it's wrong.

And a lot of the difference comes down to circumstances and experience. Lan Wangji had the security and the status to blithely trust in the rules as dictated by his clan. Wei Wuxian had to grow up, in the sense of moral and ethical development, a lot faster… simply because he didn't have that luxury.

…mind you, the fact that acting childish is part of Wei Wuxian's love language does muddy the waters a bit! (Fun fact: there's even a word for that in Japanese – *amae*.)

And on that note, one of the interesting things that occurred to me, writing this, is that the "hard to read" aspect of the relationship is a bit reversed. In this setting, most of the people around Lan Wangji are already aware that he's not straight, so you don't have canon's homophobia as a confounding factor. Then add to that the fact that Wei Wuxian doesn't have the set behavior of "pay attention to me!" – in part because he *has* Lan Wangji's undivided attention – and the confounding factor that he's just generally playful and friendly, and yes – Wei Wuxian would be the tricky one to read in this case!

Chapter 18: Reactions

Chapter Summary

> The project has gone public… which means it's time for some much-delayed changes.

Chapter Notes

> Quick note: I'm visiting family this week, so comment responses are likely to be short and/or delayed.

The conspiracy boards, as always, were the first to react. Some exploded with capslock-ridden keysmashes screaming vindication, but most rolled their eyes over the obvious prank and began in-depth analysis of the admittedly impressive deepfake technology employed – which was also the reaction shared by the wider community.

(*Not everyone was skeptical.*

Shrieking from a girls' dorm in Cloud Recesses set aside for the summer work-study students roused nearly the entire building.

In a suburb on the outskirts of Caiyi, a young woman who worked part time at a stationery store in the historic district let out a single high-pitched squeak and fainted.

A group of skateboard enthusiasts stared at each other.

"Guys. Guys. *Yiling Laozu* borrowed my skateboard. *...and did a sweet flip. Wow. Guess that's what he meant about being an acrobat* or something*..."*)

Except.

Except that every time people checked with the university, they confirmed the announcement. The press conference was *actually going to happen*. Big-name reporters and politicians were suddenly scrambling for flights into Caiyi.

Slowly, it began to sink in that this was *really happening*.

Rumors and speculation flew. Around the world historians and theoreticians spluttered as tenured professors and up-and-coming graduate students began feverishly revisiting their sources and devising research plans. Political powerhouses started devising plans of their

own, as more and more people poured into Caiyi, drawn by the media circus and hoping to glimpse the elusive living Yiling Laozu in person.

Some more patiently than others.

The chaos was *glorious*. A pity no one on the project seemed to appreciate it.

“This is ridiculous,” Lan Qiren grumbled, looking at the long, long list of people attending the press conference. Nie Huaisang could already tell they’d have to do this again, at least twice. The university plain didn’t have the *facilities* for a guest list this long. “The announcement covered everything of importance! Why must we go through with this nonsense?”

Nie Huaisang hid a smirk behind his cell phone. “Be honest. Would *you* have believed a word of it, without hard proof?”

Lan Qiren scowled ferociously, which Nie Huaisang took as a confession that the answer was *absolutely not* and the man didn’t want to admit that Nie Huaisang had actually made a point. Especially when Lan Qiren responded by acting as if he hadn’t asked the question in the first place. “This should be unnecessary!” he fumed instead.

“Good,” Nie Huaisang told him. “That anger? Keep it.”

That, at least, prompted a puzzled look on the man’s part; he clearly hadn’t expected that response.

“When you go up in front of all those people tomorrow? *Be* tired. *Be* frazzled. And most of all, be *angry*,” Nie Huaisang told him confidently. “Remember, we had a *plan*, one that was made with Wei Wuxian’s best interests in mind.” Granted, an utterly unrealistic one, only made well after the fact, and getting Lan Qiren to cough it up had taken a truly annoying amount of arm-twisting. Not that he had any intention of *sharing* those particular details. The point was that they *had* had the plan, and to Lan Qiren’s credit, he’d at least made a real attempt to be sensitive to Wei Wuxian’s needs in the process. “And now a bunch of criminal scumbags have forced your hand!”

Of course, they hadn’t mentioned *that* part in the initial announcement. They’d needed to save a few bombshells for the press conference, after all!

Lan Qiren pursed his lips sourly. “I do not see the point in mentioning *that* at all,” he groused. “The attempt was prevented, the intruders have been dealt with, and the police are investigating, there is no reason to discuss it.”

“Except that the whole point of this is to make it harder for them to try again,” Nie Huaisang reminded him. “And that means shining a light on it. Part of that is getting the public on our side.”

Not to mention that a lot of people were going to be primed to see Lan Qiren as the bad guy, especially when he refused to trot Wei Wuxian out for everyone to gawk at. This whole thing

was going to take a careful balancing act. They had to make it clear that the project was protecting Wei Wuxian's interests, not just locking him up for study like mustache-twirling mad scientists – which was going to be hard enough with a public primed by the movies to expect that narrative, let alone the abundance of third parties that would happily use the accusation to try to snatch control of the project into their own hands. But they also needed to avoid the equally explosive landmine of the public assuming (not entirely incorrectly) that the project was protecting Wei Wuxian *from them*. A convenient third party bad guy they could point a finger at was definitely going to help.

Honestly, as frustrating as wrangling Lan Qiren could be, in an odd way the director was *perfect* for this. Oh, he came off as so by-the-book that he had a list of rules instead of a conscience. But he also had a towering temper and an ability to nurse grudges that was genuinely unparalleled, which meant that the *instant* he got his dander up, all his beloved rules would go flying out the window. Given that the whole point of the press conference was people *questioning Lan Qiren's decisions*, that wouldn't take long. All Nie Huaisang had to do was prime the man so that when his top blew, it would be in a proper display of righteous anger that would sell their narrative better than any dignified propriety ever could.

Lan Qiren huffed. "The public that is *still* wasting everyone's time making such a ridiculous racket at the gates?" he asked sourly.

Nie Huaisang snickered. "You didn't seriously expect them to stop *now*, did you?" he asked.

At least his little ploy in the convention had defused the most volatile initial reactions – nothing like unleashing a little divide-and-conquer to break a potential mob's momentum. He'd had several tricks like that ready to go, cover accounts playing the reasonable skeptic to curb enthusiasm and to take the lead on being "persuaded" of the validity of the announcement, things like that.

Of course, that thought led to another, and this time when he tapped his phone against the tip of his nose, it was to hide a frown of his own. Because he was acutely aware that he was not the only one trying his hand at a little social media-style social engineering. The bots were one thing – they were like digital rats, and when it came to the whole Yiling Laozu business, the click-bait didn't even *have* to write itself. But he'd spotted a number of other dummy accounts. Some of them were stirring up trouble, which was pretty much what he'd expected… but others were a lot more subtle. The sort of *hey, you don't think…?* and *I wonder…* tactics specifically aimed to lead people to conclusions that they thought were their own idea.

Thus far, those worried him the most. Both because they seemed aimed at sowing distrust, rather than pushing any clear agenda, and because he knew perfectly well that for every dummy account he spotted, there were three that he probably hadn't. And he couldn't quite put his finger on how many there were, or what their goals were. His brother suspected that it was an extension of the meddling that had kept animosity towards the project running high despite weeks passing, and no doubt that was one factor in the mix…

But.

He hummed to himself, skimming emails and notifications as he turned possibilities and options around in his mind.

Because Dage had been right when he'd said they'd been lucky that the attempted kidnapping happened when it did. Incredibly lucky. *Too* lucky, even.

Nie Huaisang didn't trust that sort of luck. It smacked of *intent*.

The problem was that intent implied an intended *outcome*. But what was the endgame of deliberately failing the attempt? An asset like Xue Yang couldn't possibly be cheap or easy to replace. So why employ him on an operation that had been set up to fail? Who *gained* by a failure like that?

Noting a new set of notifications that had just come in, Nie Huaisang huffed and lowered his phone. Really, all this skullduggery was much too high above his pay grade! He was here to sow chaos – er, manage the project's public relations. He'd just hand off his suspicions to Xiao Xingchen and his partner and then watch the drama from a properly safe distance. And in the meantime…

"The delegation from Yiling will be arriving around noon. We should make sure someone is at the station to meet them."

Ah, and there was the signature scowl of *who put all these* people *in my science!* that he'd gotten to know so very well over the past month! "I do not understand why they are being given such special treatment," Lan Qiren seethed. "Wei Wuxian is from the sixth century, he has absolutely nothing to do with the modern town. There is no reason for them to be involved at all, let alone given special treatment!"

Nie Huaisang beamed his most aggravating smile and gestured expansively. "Yes, but it's all about *appearances*!" he declared grandly. "Even if *Wei Wuxian* has no connection to them, *Yiling Laozu* is *their* folklore and therefore *their* heritage. Cutting them out makes you look like an arrogant elitist bourgeoisie who thinks he's better than the good, salt of the earth people."

Heh. Lan Qiren looked rather dyspeptic at that… probably because on a certain level he absolutely *did* think that, the man just knew better than to *say* it.

"More to the point," Nie Huaisang said blithely, "they're *seen* as having a say, but they're also the least likely to have an agenda here beyond leveraging the project's fame into additional funding for their town. They certainly know that they don't have the resources to handle this 'nonsense.' So if we can convince them that we respect their interests, they're likely to support us."

Although that was going to be a harder sell than he was making it out to be, given that the project had already steamrolled over Yiling's objections once by proceeding with thawing *their* Yiling Laozu in the first place. Oh well. He'd known this phase was going to be tricky when he'd agreed to the job!

Lan Qiren sighed in resignation, but before he could say anything more, the phone on his desk rang. The man eyed it suspiciously, which was both hilarious and a fairly good indication of what life had been like since the announcement, but answered.

"What is it?" he demanded curtly. "I left clear instructions that I am in a meeting and not to be disturbed…"

Nie Huaisang perked up in his chair when Lan Qiren cut off abruptly, scowl deepening at whatever the person on the other end of the line – probably the secretary – was saying.

"…Jin Guangshan. I see."

For just a second, the man's eyes cut over to Nie Huaisang, who did *not* wriggle in his seat or let a gleeful shark-smile slip. He'd been wondering when that particular power player would make his move.

"Very well," Lan Qiren said after a moment. "Put him through." Reaching out, he pressed the button to put the call on speaker before setting the phone down. *Excellent*.

Deliberately, Nie Huaisang wrapped his fingers around his array of phone charms so that none of them would clink or jingle, and settled in to listen.

"Ah, Professor Lan! Thank you for taking my call." Jin Guangshan's voice was warm but brisk, managing to strike a neat balance between professionalism and friendliness without being actively smarmy.

"Jin Guangshan." There was no mistaking the tight edge in Lan Qiren's voice for *anything* like friendliness, but it would honestly have been out of character for the man anyway. "Thank you, but I am extremely busy at the moment…"

"Yes, my apologies. But do allow me to congratulate you and your research team on such a truly astounding discovery! I can't imagine how incredible it must have been to have been there when it happened." Jin Guangshan's voice shifted, taking on a sympathetic tone. "I won't keep you, but I did wish to reach out and offer my support. I know from my own experience how overwhelming that sort of fame and media buzz can be!" Jin Guangshan hesitated an artful moment. "Forgive me for inquiring on a sensitive subject, but… is your security adequate? I know the university is not really designed for this level of… attention."

Oh, he was *good*. Nie Huaisang wanted to applaud. Or maybe take notes.

Lan Qiren, predictably, bristled. "I have the utmost faith in Nie Mingjue and his officers," he said stiffly.

"Oh, of course!" Jin Guangshan's smile was audible. "I merely wanted to say that if you have need of anything… Well, I admit I don't deal in such things beyond my own security details, but I have friends who are well-versed in such arrangements. I'm sure they would gladly help, just to meet the man of the hour!"

If anything, Lan Qiren bristled even more. If this kept up, Nie Huaisang wouldn't be entirely surprised if that neatly tended beard poofed out in all directions like the tail of an offended cat. "I stated this quite clearly in the initial announcement, Master Jin. The reason we delayed announcing what happened was to allow Wei Wuxian time to adjust in a stress-free environment, and that *remains* our priority. I will not have him treated as a curiosity to be stared at! It will be *his* choice when and to whom introductions are to be made."

Behind the cover of his phone, Nie Huaisang smiled wryly. The ironic part was that Lan Qiren genuinely *believed* what he was saying, with no sense of how thoroughly he was retconning the early trials and tribulations of the project when Wei Wuxian first woke. Not that it was a *surprise* he'd do so; everyone rewrote their memories to cast themselves in the best light at least a little, and even more so someone like Lan Qiren, so certain that he was always *right*.

At least he was retconning, rather than doubling down on his original mistakes.

"Ah, I've overstepped. My apologies." Jin Guangshan didn't exactly sound particularly *sorry*, Nie Huaisang noted. That was more a "mistakes were made" sort of tone. "As you know, my grandson is good friends with Wen Yuan; he's been worried. Especially given the announcement came so suddenly. I assume something must have happened to prompt that decision."

Props to Lan Qiren, the man *could* recognize blatant fishing for information. "The specific circumstances of the project will be discussed at the press conference tomorrow," he said in a tone that Nie Huaisang suspected he'd honed trying to quell classrooms of rowdy students.

Jin Guangshan chuckled. "Of course! I will be watching it with great interest. Thank you, I won't take up any more of your time. But please, if there is anything I can be of service, don't hesitate to let me know!"

"I will bear that in mind," Lan Qiren said, with all the enthusiasm of someone being offered a completely optional root canal operation, and ended the call.

Nie Huaisang snickered. "Oh, he's *good*."

Lan Qiren stared flatly at him.

Nie Huaisang gestured expansively with his phone. "Didn't you notice? Lots of generous talk about *offering* support, but he never actually offered anything concrete. If we tried to take him up on it, he'd have all the bargaining chips."

Lan Qiren scowled thunderously. "I am not so foolish as to fall for such blatant opportunism!"

Nie Huaisang smirked. "And I'm pretty sure that was his plan." Jin Guangshan had been laying on the solicitous concern way too heavily for it to be anything but a ploy – especially aimed at a bristly older man like Lan Qiren. "And that's the sly part. We don't take him up on it, and if anything goes wrong he's poised to swoop in with a *well, I tried to help*. Win-win."

Rather like quite a few other win-win scenarios that they'd encountered recently, and call him a nasty-minded suspicious sort, but Nie Huaisang didn't think that was a coincidence. After all, *Jin* Zixun had been one of those win-win situations, too… and Jin Guangshan did seem the sort to keep a pet murderer in his back pocket.

Probably not on his payroll, though – too easily traced. He'd have a middleman, or possibly more than one. Just in case.

At the same time, Nie Huaisang couldn't shake the feeling that something about that call had been… off. Yes, he'd expected Jin Guangshan to try to maneuver his fingers into the pie, but making his move in person like that, rather than pulling the strings of middlemen? That was strangely *direct* of him. Jin Guangshan was not the type to act directly when he could get someone else to do the work.

Nie Huaisang didn't like odd events. They meant he'd probably missed something.

Huffing mentally, he tapped out a quick and *discreet* heads-up to Nie Mingjue and Wen Qing. No names named, of course; now that they had all eyes on the project, he was just assuming that hackers had gotten their fingers into everything that had *anything* to do with electronic communications, and some of those hackers were doubtless on payrolls, legitimate and otherwise.

Which meant that for the most part, rather than being proper denizens of the twenty-first century and doing things digitally, anything important or sensitive had to be communicated in *person*.

Ah well. He'd always had a fondness for a personal touch to his business.

So he'd have to give Dage an update on the latest skullduggery… later! In the meantime…

Lowering his phone, he looked at Lan Qiren. "Now, on the subject of nuisances with the name of Jin, I'm sure you're aware that short of locking him in a closet somewhere – which seems a legitimate solution to *me* – Jin Zixun *is* going to try to make a play for camera time. The good news is that he's self-absorbed enough that it should be easy to get him to confess to trying to steal Wei Wuxian's things. We just need to be prepared for the follow-up questions, like why we haven't thrown him off a cliff yet…"

"Hm."

Looking up, Lan Wangji caught Wen Qing's eye, sharing a silent moment of amusement. They'd both become very familiar with that particular intrigued hum. "Wei Ying?"

Sprawled out on the ground like a lazy cat, the cultivator tapped the edge of his borrowed tablet. "That list of questions you showed me makes a *lot* more sense now," he said wryly, still reading.

Lan Wangji lowered the research proposal he had been reading – he had already seen enough to know that it would be joining the large pile of rejects on the side of the table – and turned

to give Wei Wuxian his full attention.

It was a pleasant day, sunny but with enough of a breeze to be comfortable rather than overly warm, and they had agreed that it was too nice to do their work indoors. Unfortunately, none of them felt comfortable going out on the main campus grounds right now, for reasons that had nothing to do with the attempted kidnapping. Nie Mingjue had stepped up security to keep the crowds of would-be sightseers at bay, but there was only so much he could really do. And that didn't help when it came to the students and faculty of the university, who had legitimate *reasons* to be on the campus.

Honestly, the faculty were by far the bigger headache. Students, at least, were accustomed to being told something was off-limits to them.

So rather than setting up at one of the outdoor study areas in the main campus, Wen Qing had come to the Jingshi, where Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had moved the table from the sitting room out into the garden, so they could review the project's revised proposals in the fresh air without being disturbed, securely hidden behind Wei Wuxian's wards.

Or rather, that was what Lan Wangji and Wen Qing were doing. Wei Wuxian had instead opted to help himself to the tablet that held a selection of papers previously published by the project researchers, and was skimming through them to familiarize himself with both the individual researchers' areas of interest, and the research process as a whole.

Lan Wangji had to admit that he found himself a little bemused. He was well aware that one of his weaknesses as a scholar was that he'd never truly learned to speed-read; he always got sidetracked by details and ended up reading every article in full, even when it ultimately proved irrelevant to his own work. But Wei Wuxian clearly had the knack for it, despite his unfamiliarity with much of the terminology.

Or possibly because of it. Doubtless it was easier to avoid getting bogged down in details when comprehending the specifics would demand so much additional effort.

"How so?" he asked, curious. And, truth be told, ready for a brief respite. The ratio of reasonable research proposals to those that were not was… unfavorable. And this was *after* extensive vetting and revisions!

Wei Wuxian tilted his head. "What they're doing in these papers… It's rather like what I would do on a tricky night hunt. Especially when the people I talked to didn't know what I needed… or at least wouldn't admit it! Sometimes the best way to find the truth is to look for the small things that no one thinks to hide."

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully at that. Wei Wuxian was certainly not the first person to note the parallels between the way archaeologists pieced together the events of the ancient past and the way detectives pieced together clues. He still remembered how vividly struck he had been by a small site – the remains of a campfire – and how archeologists had reconstructed the season, how many people had been present, and even the direction of the wind that night forty thousand years earlier.

A chuckle interrupted his thoughts. “Of course, that’s hard enough when it has only been a year or two, not hundreds!” Wei Wuxian paused. “Although some of the things that they’re looking at are very… specific.”

Wen Qing snorted. “Don’t underestimate the tunnel vision of a scholar hyperfocused on his pet theory and area of specialization,” she added dryly.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Lan Zhan *did* mention that,” he said with a wry smile. Tilting his head, he studied the two of them curiously. “So. What tiny details do you two research, then?”

Inside, Lan Wangji froze, not sure how to answer. But there was nothing confrontational in Wei Wuxian’s bearing, only interest. “It is… more that our specializations do not lend themselves to it,” he said carefully.

Wen Qing huffed at him as Wei Wuxian blinked, clearly puzzled. “What he means is… Well. There’s a joke that higher education means you know more and more about less and less. It’s not entirely wrong. Part of higher education is choosing an area of specialization, and your focus tends to narrow down the more you dig into the material. This is a high-profile project and the people on it tend to be the leaders in their fields, so…”

“Ah.” Wei Wuxian nodded knowingly. “So they tend to know a *lot* about a very narrow topic?” His smile turned crooked as he set the tablet down. “So they get into the habit of looking for nails to use their hammers on.”

Ah. Lan Wangji wasn’t certain at this distance, but it looked like Wei Wuxian had been reading an analysis of pollen counts from the Sui and Tang dynasties assessing the ecological impact of the massive canal-building projects of that era. Small wonder the man seemed bemused. Lan Wangji had read that or a similar article, and he’d been fascinated by the sheer amount of information that could be gleaned from such a small analysis and the way it fleshed out his knowledge of the ancient world… but the subsequent claims about the long-term effects on the political world had involved more than a few leaps of logic that definitely strained the bounds of credulity.

Wen Qing snorted inelegantly. “You’re not wrong,” she said, before continuing her explanation. “There’s also the fact that most of the people participating in the project have a hard science focus in particular, which means they’re trained to focus in on a small detail and analyze it intensively. They care about the history, or they wouldn’t be here, but…”

That was not entirely accurate. A reasonable summation of work such as that represented by the pollen analysis, yes, but…

Lan Wangji had forgotten that a large part of the original mission of the Yiling Laozu project had been to better understand the uncanny level of *preservation* by the ice. Easily half of the scientists involved in the project were purely physical scientists with no background in archaeology or history – in fact, he was willing to bet that his uncle had deliberately selected against even a personal hobby level of interest, in Lan Qiren’s quest to expunge any possible hint of “sentimental romanticism” from the project.

Lan Wangji wasn't sure *why* those researchers had stayed on the project, now that they knew that "uncanny" was *precisely* the right term to use and that any answers were far outside anyone's field of expertise. Although he did suppose that prestige had an allure of its own… and no one who had applied to the project could be said to be lacking in ambition.

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully. "And you two?" he pressed. "You are part of the project, so are you not experts as well?"

It was a valid question, Lan Wangji had to admit. Although technically he and Wen Qing had not originally been full project members, but peripheral staff. Neither of them had planned or intended to be all that involved in the research – let alone the central roles they now occupied.

"It's more a difference in our fields," Wen Qing said. "Lan Wangji is a historian, not an archaeologist – his field lends itself to looking at how things connect to each other." She shrugged. "And I do research, but I trained as a doctor first. I didn't get to choose what problems came through the doors. Which meant I needed a broad base of knowledge to work from."

Wei Wuxian nodded thoughtfully, considering that, and Lan Wangji used the break in the conversation to finish reviewing the proposal he'd been looking at. Confirming that his initial impression was indeed correct, he set it aside on the stack of proposals that needed to be revised or reframed – or, as Wen Qing had dryly put it, the *tell me how right my previous research was* pile.

Which, granted. Wei Wuxian's ability to confirm or refute the conclusions of the academic community *was* valuable… assuming they fell within topics he could reasonably be expected to know something about, and assuming his account would even be believed against established assumptions. But the confirmation – or refutation – of a hypothesis did not a research project make.

Unfortunately, compared to the rejection and revision piles, only a few had actually passed inspection thus far. Which was part of why they'd moved up the timetable on reviewing the proposals; now that the project had gone public about Wei Wuxian, they finally had the opportunity to expand the project and bring in disciplines better suited to the changed circumstances. Thus, they needed to clarify what the needs of the project were.

Lan Wangji went to add to their notes on the matter and hesitated. Something about the conversation was tugging at him, like a thought lurking just out of reach.

"It still seems *odd*," Wei Wuxian admitted, and Lan Wangji shifted his attention back to the conversation. Perhaps the distraction would lure the elusive thought into clarity. "Why give greater respect to those who limit the range of their knowledge?"

Ah. Yes, from the perspective of a properly educated junzi, that would seem like an alien mindset, wouldn't it? An accomplished scholar of Wei Wuxian's time would have been expected to master the six arts – in essence, the equivalent of what the Western tradition would call a well-rounded education in the liberal arts. Focusing on only a single field of

knowledge would be considered unbalanced, even anathema to the proper cultivation of one's self. Which made him wonder what the perspective of spiritual cultivation would be…

Wen Qing tapped her stylus thoughtfully against the table before picking up the next proposal. "I think it's less that we respect the limited range of knowledge, and more that the limited range is a consequence of how one earns respect," she mused. "To get a degree – to be recognized as a master in your field – you're expected to produce work that represents *new knowledge* in some way."

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows at that, looking intrigued. Which made sense. The conviction that all good things were grounded in the ways of the ancients had not been as pronounced in the age of disunity as it became with later eras and the rise of the School of Principle in the Song era – in part because the fall of the Han had been a recent and spectacular example casting doubt on those ways. But the idea that one could not be recognized as a scholar unless one did something *new*... That would still have been considered quite radical.

"That would get complicated very quickly," Wei Wuxian said thoughtfully. "As scholars learn more and more, there would be less and less for new scholars to discover… Which I suppose is what you meant by *consequence*!" he concluded with a laugh. "There is less room for discovery, and so new scholars must fit into smaller spaces."

"In addition, the conferral of a degree has become the starting point of a career, not its culmination," Lan Wangji said quietly. "For most scholars, they must continue to publish new research, or risk losing their profession."

He had not always appreciated the extent to which his family's involvement in Cloud Recesses University had protected him from the publish-or-perish paradigm. He published papers regularly, but by choice, rather than because he needed to prove his value to the administration. That in turn also allowed him to set his research aside when teaching demanded his time and attention. He knew many who could not, and their work on both sides had suffered for it.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head, smiling wryly. "And all that publishing means there's even *more* material for new scholars to learn if they're to find their little piece to claim, because there are only so many hours in a day," he said. "The study of talismans was like that, in the sects. Learning them well enough to make your own when you needed to… well. Most cultivators simply learned a few basic ones and got someone else to make anything more complicated. There weren't that many who bothered to learn the *how and why* of making them."

Ah. That answered his question from weeks ago: Wei Wuxian's in-depth mastery *was* unusual. Which explained in turn why lingfu had gone down in history as a secret, esoteric art, if they were in essence a complex technology requiring a level of expertise that many did not master.

"Still." Wei Wuxian picked up his tablet again, smiling wryly. "Some of these studies seem… not very useful."

Lan Wangji huffed. “Knowledge has value in itself,” he said – although not as sharply as he might have. He was aware that Wei Wuxian’s inclinations tended towards the practical more than the theoretical. Which wasn’t a bad thing; he suspected that matter-of-fact pragmatism played a large part in how well the man had taken his dislocation in time.

“Don’t complain,” Wen Qing added tartly, even as her eyes laughed. “If we hadn’t been interested in studying something with no practical uses, *you* would still be stuck in a glacier on a mountain!”

Wei Wuxian laughed and sketched a teasing bow of acknowledgment in her direction before turning his attention back to the tablet. Recognizing that the conversation had, for the moment, ended, Lan Wangji returned to his own work.

Still. In the back of his mind, he found himself turning the question over. What *would* have happened, if the world had decided to leave Yiling Laozu in the glacier?

The simple answer might be “nothing” – but it would be inaccurate. The glacier had been slowly melting away even before the event that had revealed Wei Wuxian in the ice. Eventually, the ice would have thinned enough to free him. It was hard to guess specifics, given that Wei Wuxian had no memory of how he had come to be encased in the glacier or how exactly he had survived – another reason so many research proposals from the project were unviable! – but given that he had awakened in the lab once the ice was thin enough to break free…

He would have woken up high in the mountains, completely alone, with no idea what had happened or how much time had passed. It was entirely possible he would not have realized something was very, very *wrong* until he reached Yiling. He would have been left adrift in a changed world, unable to even communicate enough to learn what had happened.

It would not be hard to paint a bleak picture… except.

Except that Wei Wuxian was observant, adaptable… and, more than anything, *resilient*. As soon as Yiling came into sight, if not sooner, and long before he was seen by anyone, he would have *known* that something was very strange, and acted accordingly.

Knowing the man as he did now, having seen how he conducted himself when it was obvious that the project was hiding something… Lan Wangji had no trouble at all picturing Wei Wuxian staying out of sight. Watching. Stealing clothes so that he could blend in. Playing the mute and the foreigner and even the madman and any other role he needed to take as he learned the customs needed to move through the world. Picking up the language through exposure and effort – possibly seeking out ghosts to help. Slipping away to vanish into the world… a world that would have had no idea anything had happened until some scientific expedition or enterprising tourist arrived at the glacier to find Yiling Laozu gone, and perhaps a single set of footprints leading away.

The scenario would certainly make for an excellent premise for a novel. Still… for all the faults and missteps of the project, Lan Wangji was glad that it hadn’t happened that way. At least Wei Wuxian had not been left to make his way through a changed world alone. And… if

he was to be honest, the thought of going about his own life without that vibrant presence seemed very *empty* to Lan Wangji now.

Wen Qing made a thoughtful sound. “Oh, this one might actually be workable,” she noted.

Lan Wangji looked up from consigning yet another “tell us how you survived” to the rejection stack. “The author?”

Wen Qing flipped back to check and blinked. “…Yao Yingjie, of all people. I admit, I didn’t see that one coming.”

…what.

Wei Wuxian got up to peer over Wen Qing’s shoulder. “Ah, he’s asking about trade!” he said. “Now *that* is something I actually know a bit about.”

That did make sense. He had mentioned that when his sect brother Jiang Cheng had become sect leader, he’d had little patience for that side of Yunmeng Jiang’s business, and had often delegated the day-to-day matters to Wei Wuxian.

Except. “Professor *Yao*.”

Wei Wuxian blinked. “Am I missing something?” he asked curiously.

Lan Wangji had forgotten – they’d never really talked about the events that had driven them to remove Wei Wuxian from the lab. Wei Wuxian’s grasp of modern Mandarin had still been rudimentary at the time, and there had been so many other things demanding his attention. “Professor Yao was behind the theft of your belongings,” he said flatly.

“Technically, that was his assistant,” Wen Qing corrected dryly, handing the proposal over for Wei Wuxian to peruse. “Professor Yao was rather insistent that he should get to keep them, however.”

“Ah,” Wei Wuxian said wryly, flipping through the pages. “Yes, he does seem *very* interested in my things, doesn’t he?” He huffed. “Still. At least he is asking about my things, rather than my *everything*, as young Lan Jingyi would say.”

Wen Qing huffed as Wei Wuxian handed the proposal back. “I suppose that’s a silver lining of sorts to his single-mindedness. You’re not a person, just a walking reference, so he’s not going to ask gossipy questions and pretend it’s research.”

Lan Wangji allowed himself a few deep breaths as he reminded himself that grudge-holding was *not* professional behavior.

Although. “Given his previous behavior, I believe we should set clear boundaries regarding what is permissible.” He would not put it past the man to write a reasonable-sounding proposal, only to walk through the door and start making impossible demands. “And his assistant is *not welcome*.”

He and Wen Qing exchanged grim looks. The one thing all of them had looked forward to with the project going public was the chance to finally and officially ban Jin Zixun from further participation without the fear of him running to the press or his uncle for revenge. But Nie Huaisang's warning about the call from Jin Guangshan was an unpleasant reminder that removing the man would bring its own problems.

Lan Wangji remained of the opinion that it would be worth it. As Nie Huaisang had noted, Jin Zixun's obvious missteps would make his continued presence on the project difficult to defend. Jin Guangshan would meddle or he would not, regardless.

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow at their expressions, but didn't press. Instead, he craned his neck shamelessly to look at some of the other papers on the table. "Well! That Professor Yao might not be an admirable sort, but at least he's asking questions I can answer," he said wryly, turning one sheet around to look at it more closely. "This one is about some caves near Dunhuang. I don't know anything about that! I never traveled west of Qishan, I was *busy*!"

Wen Qing sighed ruefully. "He has a point," she said wryly to Lan Wangji. "The best research project in the world isn't going to get very far if it's just asking him about things he has no reason to know anything about. Maybe we should just start with a general topic review?"

Lan Wangji was reaching for their notes when he hesitated, that elusive thought finally coming to light. "That will not solve the core of the problem," he said thoughtfully. "Which is… each of these proposals still follows the *paradigm* of the original project."

Wei Wuxian tilted his head. "Paradigm?" he asked.

"A paradigm is… a conceptual structure that shapes the manner in which one approaches a problem or concept," Lan Wangji explained, with an odd feeling of nostalgia. Between his own growing vocabulary and now intuitive grasp of the structure of the language, Wei Wuxian rarely needed to ask for an explanation for new words these days. Then inspiration struck. "An example would be your guidao – it is a shift in paradigm from the way that traditional cultivation approached resentful energy."

And oh, but that explained a great deal indeed about how careful Wei Wuxian had been in discussing it! Paradigm shifts were rarely accepted easily by wider society, especially when they went against established assumptions. And such resistance frequently took the form of hostility towards the one who had made the shift.

Wei Wuxian's eyebrows shot up. "Hm! Interesting… and you think that is the problem with these?"

Wen Qing had shot up in her chair, rifling rapidly through the papers in front of her. Now she groaned and slumped forward in a rare undignified gesture of frustration. "And he's *right*. Ancestors, it's been right in front of our noses the whole time!" Sighing, she pushed herself upright, and smiled wryly. "Which is a fairly classic thing with paradigm shifts. Often the solution is *simple* from the new perspective, but from the old perspective you couldn't even see the problem."

Wei Wuxian nodded thoughtfully. “And what is it that you didn’t see before?” he asked curiously.

“These proposals – the project as a whole – follow the paradigm of archaeology,” Lan Wangji said. “The study of a site, or an artifact. The close analysis of limited evidence that cannot speak.”

Wen Qing huffed and nodded. “When what we really need is… not just an ethnographer. We need a *biographer* – or even a journalist. Someone who does *oral history*.”

Lan Wangji nodded, feeling chagrined. In hindsight, oral history was exactly what he had been doing with Wei Wuxian all along… except that his approach had been scattershot and wholly unsystematic, because it had never occurred to him to think of what he was doing in those terms. His required graduate classes in the conducting of modern folklore research were long behind him… and he had been so very focused on Wei Wuxian’s origins that it had never crossed his mind that learning from the man rightly would require methodologies developed for the study of far more recent events. Events that had occurred within *living memory*.

Because for Wei Wuxian, the distant past *was* living memory.

“And what is different about that?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“Scale,” Wen Qing said simply. “Rather than digging deep into a narrow topic, an oral history is aimed at pulling together a *life story*.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s focused on the *person* and the events that they lived through the lens of their own personal experience. Which is a *far* better way to approach this situation than people creating research plans based on their own interests without any consideration of your own experience!”

“…ah,” Wei Wuxian said slowly, looking nonplussed.

Lan Wangji winced internally. “You are *not* obligated to participate,” he said, somewhat more emphatically than was perhaps appropriate. But the thought of being asked to recount everything you remembered about the course of your life… that was daunting even to him, and he was well aware that his own life had been rather staid and uneventful compared to Wei Wuxian’s. To say nothing of the fact that Wei Wuxian’s past was inextricably tied to his dislocation in time and the loss of everything he had known. It was not something that they had spoken about; Lan Wangji was unsure if he was the right person to broach the question. But Wei Wuxian had to still be grieving that loss.

He was also very aware that despite Lan Wangji’s own repeated insistence otherwise, Wei Wuxian was inclined to see himself as indebted to the project for the aid that they had given him, and might on those grounds agree to something he would not otherwise do.

Which reminded him. Lan Wangji had read the psychological literature on trauma that Wen Qing had sent him, and shared it with Wei Wuxian. But it might be time to raise again the question of bringing a psychologist on staff for consultation. And not just for Wei Wuxian; after the scare with the attempted kidnapping, he suspect he and Wen Yuan would also benefit from someone neutral to talk to.

From the amused glance Wei Wuxian cast him, the man was well aware why Lan Wangji insisted on repeating the point. “It’s just *odd* to think that you people are so interested in my life!” he said ruefully.

Wen Qing chuckled. “Wouldn’t the people of your time have been excited at the opportunity to learn the wisdom of the ancients from one of said ancients?”

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “The ancients believed that drinking elixirs of *mercury* was the key to cultivating immortality,” he said dryly. “I had no interest in imitating them!” He shook his head. “It never made sense to me, how so many people act like the past was somehow so much better than the present. Old doesn’t always mean good. Sometimes it just means they didn’t know better. After all, the ancients were only human, too.”

“That is, I think, part of why so many will want to hear your story,” Lan Wangji said quietly. “To put a human face on the past.”

It was something he’d seen many times in his students. Oh, there were always those who held the past apart, on a pedestal or in contempt. But for most of them… there was a real sense of *wonder*, as it sank in that the people of the past were *people*, with virtues and foibles and raunchy double entendres.

“You do not need to decide now,” he said after a moment’s silence.

“But you should decide soon,” Wen Qing added. “If we’re going to shift the basic paradigm of the project, then that means bouncing the whole research plan back to Lan Qiren, before we even start looking for candidates.”

Point. Much as he hated to admit it. “We should discuss it with him, regardless,” Lan Wangji said. “He already has acknowledged the need for an ethnographer of some description. Even if we decide against a full oral history, it would be best to have researchers with those skills involved…”

Rather a *lot* of things needed to be decided, Wei Wuxian had to acknowledge wryly. Lan Wangji and Nie Huaisang had warned him that things would get very busy once the official announcement that he wasn’t actually dead – whoops, so sorry to disappoint! – was made. But he had to admit that he hadn’t quite wrapped his head around the scale of it!

Frankly, he was relieved that Nie Huaisang seemed to have matters well in hand. When it came to wards and physical defenses, he trusted his knowledge, but… he was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that *everyone* in the modern era had access to tools that allowed them to communicate with anyone they chose – including simply *everyone* – with a speed that shamed even the Jin butterfly messengers.

Or that anyone would *want* to scream their thoughts to the world like that!

Apparently the Internet was “blowing up.” Whatever that meant. Wen Yuan had insisted that now was not a good time to introduce him properly to that side of modern culture. The boy had been so *earnest* about it that Wei Wuxian hadn’t had the heart to press the matter.

Even if Lan Jingyi's blanching and thousand-yard stare over something called "comment boards" was practically killing him with curiosity.

Fortunately, the question about this "oral history" thing was easily resolved. From the description Wen Qing and Lan Wangji had offered, it really wasn't all that different from what he and Lan Wangji had already been doing, just more official. He was certainly happy to give it a try!

It was certainly preferable to giving up chunks of his *hair*, as one scholar had demanded. That was just… *no*. It would be one thing if they'd just take the trimmings when he cleaned it up, but…

He understood that people in this new time thought differently about what cutting hair meant. But… he'd never had a grave to tend. Keeping his hair properly had been the one thing he *could* do to honor his parents.

If someone had asked, he would have said that it wasn't really *that* big a deal to him, it was just a thing he did. Apparently he would have been wrong.

So! Compared to that, he had no issues with just talking. Even if he still thought this level of interest in his life was just *odd*.

Now, if only certain other things would be so easy—

As if the thought had prompted it, the rod fell to the table with a clatter muffled by the odd semi-fabric of the map, and Wei Wuxian huffed with annoyance. He'd thought he'd gotten the trick of it that time!

Sighing, he straightened up, rolling his head and stretching his arms out in an effort to chase away the stiff tension from standing bent over the table for so long. Since he was taking a break anyway, he took a moment to glance outside, where Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi had claimed the garden to work on their breathing exercises together.

Thus far, that seemed to be going well. Wen Yuan was at a point in his own training where he was perfectly capable of walking a junior – even though he and Lan Jingyi were actually of an age – through the first steps of meditation to open the meridians and begin preparing the foundation for one's core. It helped that, unlike most junior disciples at his stage of cultivation that Wei Wuxian had taught in the past (who had generally been much, much younger, not that he would be telling Wen Yuan that!), Wen Yuan had the maturity and calm temperament needed to be an effective tutor.

Better still, brash young Lan Jingyi had the rare self-confidence to *admit* that he didn't understand something and, therefore, did not hesitate to ask *all the questions*. Which, in turn, forced Wen Yuan to think about his own process of cultivation in a way that simply *cultivating* did not require. It was a good combination, and one Wei Wuxian had used effectively in the past to help juniors through the tricky early stages of cultivation.

Still. Better to keep an eye on things. They were both still *students*, after all. With all the potential for missteps and mischief borne of youth and inexperience!

For now, though, Wen Yuan had Lan Jingyi's instruction well in hand, so, still rolling his shoulders out, Wei Wuxian turned his mind back to his own conundrum.

Although he did mischievously entertain the thought of asking Lan Wangji for help. After all, the man had *excellent* hands, broad and long-fingered and strong. He probably gave *great* shoulder rubs!

Chuckling, Wei Wuxian made a mental note to try that at some point, just to see how Lan Wangji reacted. Then he set his hands on his hips and scowled at the recalcitrant map again.

"What are you trying to do?"

Wei Wuxian looked up to see Lan Wangji watching him from the kitchen, where he had been making preparations for dinner after his latest meeting with Lan Qiren about the research proposals. Which Wei Wuxian suspected had more to do with the desire to chop things into tiny pieces than actual meal preparation!

But the man was looking at him with his usual patient interest, so Wei Wuxian smiled at him. "Just trying to figure something out."

When Lan Wangji simply waited, Wei Wuxian huffed and leaned back on his hands. "It's something I noticed, back when we visited Caiyi. There's something *different* about the dragon lines now."

Lan Wangji's expression did not change, but Wei Wuxian could tell that he was intrigued. Stepping into the main room, he looked down at the map that Wei Wuxian had spread out on the table. "You mentioned that the rockslide on the mountain had altered the fengshui of Cloud Recesses," he noted.

Wei Wuxian nodded. "So it did. But the effect of that was local. When we went to Caiyi, though…" He pursed his lips. "Lake Biling is where the qi of the mountains gathers to join the lowlands. It's not one of the great dragon lines, but it is a dragon line. A change in the shape of one mountain should not affect it. But it was… off."

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. "You are trying to map the dragon lines as they are now," he concluded.

Wei Wuxian grinned at him. "Exactly!" Reaching out he picked up the carved wooden stick and spun it around his fingers. "I didn't have time to look into it before, with the dragon bones. But now… well, since flying all over the country would be a little *awkward* right now, I thought I'd try something different."

Lan Wangji reached out for one of the spares, hesitating for a moment until Wei Wuxian had waved a hand in silent permission before actually picking it up. Turning it over in his hands, he blinked once. "I Ching rods?"

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Ah, you know them. Are they common today?"

“Not common,” Lan Wangji said after a moment’s pause. “Not for serious use. They are… like yao, or spiritual cultivation. Generally considered the tools of the superstitious, or entertainment for the young.” He studied the stick a little longer, then looked at Wei Wuxian. “You said that cultivators generally did not practice divination.”

Ah, yes, that had come up during their discussions regarding the oracle bones. “We didn’t,” Wei Wuxian agreed, amused. “The I Ching is not actually very good for telling the future, anyway.” Thank goodness for *that*, or they would probably have been stuck with far more caches of cursed tools! Although wood did generally decay naturally over time – better than the oracle bones had, at least. Maybe that would have mitigated it?

Setting the thought aside for later poking, he gestured at the map. “What it is good for is *finding* things.”

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. “I have read that one of the skills of Daoist masters was dowsing for water by balancing a chopstick on the index finger.”

“Dowsing?” Wei Wuxian echoed, curious.

“Using the movement of wood or metal rods to locate water sources,” Lan Wangji explained.

“Ah!” Wei Wuxian grinned slyly. “Don’t tell the sects,” he said mock-secretively, “but that was part of where my idea for the compass came from.”

Lan Wangji tilted his head in interest. “Why would the sects object?” he asked.

Wei Wuxian huffed. “What! How could simple, common, *ordinary* people have anything to teach a mighty cultivator!”

“You did not agree,” Lan Wangji observed, a subtle glint of amusement in his eyes.

Abandoning his imitation of a Jin at his pontificating best, Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. “The common people were interested in *not dying*, and they generally couldn’t just hit a problem until it went away,” he said, amused. “One could learn a lot of *practical* things from them!”

Some of those things had saved his life. A raised lintel to confine hopping corpses might not seem like much, but getting to high ground and throwing up a desperate barricade of jumbled rocks and debris had kept him from being completely overwhelmed by low-level angry dead those first few desperate days after he’d been flung bleeding into the Burial Mounds.

Really, in an ironic way being unable to use his core may have saved his life. Fighting simply hadn’t been an *option*, and so he hadn’t wasted precious time or energy on trying.

Not that he had any intention of *thanking* Wen Chao or Wen Zhuliu for that.

Some of that lore had also come in handy when he’d been developing his guidao, as well. Although part of him had to laugh; he’d done some reading on the oracle bones in preparation for the cleansing, and out of curiosity later, and he had to admit… a lot of the old rituals had apparently been based on something very much like guidao, calling on the dead for assistance. Wasn’t *that* a poke in the eye for the grumpy old guard types!

Lan Wangji looked at the map again. “So you are using the same technique to dowse for the dragon lines?”

“More or less,” Wei Wuxian admitted, chuckling ruefully. “Although it’s more *adapting* the technique… so, a bit of trial and error.” He paused. “Well. More like *lots* of trial and error,” he corrected, making a face at the sticks scattered across the map.

Lan Wangji studied the assemblage for a moment, then sank gracefully down to sit at the other side of the table.

Wei Wuxian grinned. Well, far be it for him to turn down an attentive audience! And maybe talking it through would pin down what the problem was.

“This isn’t something I *could* have done, before,” he mused, looking down at the map thoughtfully. “Our maps were accurate enough, yes, but only within a certain… hm. Scale?” After Lan Wangji nodded confirmation that he’d used the term correctly, Wei Wuxian patted the map in front of him. “The dragon lines are too *big* to map without something like this – and maps were too valuable to just draw on them, anyway!” He grinned. “Look out, Lan Zhan – I might have to marry you just for your map!”

The I Ching stick Lan Wangji was still holding made a cracking sound, and Wei Wuxian bit back a cackle. Lan Wangji looked down at it, ears pink as he took in the splintered wood. “Apologies. I was careless,” he said – although his flat stare made it clear that he knew perfectly well that Wei Wuxian had provoked him intentionally.

Wei Wuxian just grinned, unrepentant. “I made enough,” he said breezily. “But really. It is a *very* nice map.”

Lan Wangji huffed, but Wei Wuxian thought it sounded more fond than irate. “I can get you your own copy,” he said.

Wei Wuxian flopped forward onto the table and pouted up at the man. “But it wouldn’t be the same!”

Lan Wangji started to respond, and then paused. “Would there truly be a difference?”

Well, if Lan Wangji was going to be *sincere* about it… Wei Wuxian pursed his lips as he straightened. “Yes, actually,” he admitted. “I think I explained that spiritual tools become attuned to the user’s qi? That can happen to anything a person uses. New things are very…” He frowned, trying to find the right phrasing. This was tricky to express no matter *what* language he was using. “…very *of themselves*,” he finally settled on. “That’s good for some things, when you don’t want qi from other sources getting in the way, but… what I’m trying to do needs pretty much the exact opposite!”

Which was also why he was doing this *here*, in the public room of the Jingshi, rather than tucked away in Lan Wangji’s office. By both intent and physical design, the office was a secluded space, isolated from distractions – in a way, a kind of Cloud Recesses in miniature, making its own sheltered refuge away from the ebb and flow of the qi around it. Good for

focused study, but a bit awkward when the surrounding energy flow was exactly what you were trying to study in the first place!

Not to mention that, for many of the same reasons, the office wasn't the best place for keeping track of the goings-on in the garden. Thus, setting up in the main room.

Lan Wangji tilted his head in understanding, then returned to the original topic. "The map must be accurate for what you are doing to be effective?"

"At least to a certain level," Wei Wuxian agreed. "But I have worked with maps on a smaller scale for other purposes before. This one should be more than accurate enough for what I'm doing."

Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow and gestured to the map.

Nodding, Wei Wuxian gathered the scattered sticks and cleared them away, selecting one to use. "I may not have an actual map of the dragon lines as they should be, but I don't really need one," he explained. Reaching out, he tapped the end of the stick on one of the folded lines of white and grey and dark green marking the mountain ranges snaking their way across the land.

And it was fascinating to *see* them like this. Intellectually and intuitively, of course, he knew where the great rivers and mountains were! But it was interesting to see how even great peaks vanished into the vastness of the mountain ranges, how a landmark that might dominate an entire region could simply fade into insignificance when seen from the perspective of the land as a whole.

"Dragon lines come from and are part of the fengshui of the land," he said, deliberately aping the mannerisms of a particularly officious lecturer and enjoying the subtle amusement in Lan Wangji's bearing. "They are, more or less, the qi meridians of the land. Which means that there are also places that act as dantians, where qi gathers. So – we start there, and trace the lines to look for places where the flow of energy does not match what it should be." He spun the stick between his fingers and grinned. "The I Ching sticks are meant to respond to energy in certain ways… so!"

Balancing the stick upright on the tip of his finger, Wei Wuxian held it out over one of the lesser great mountains – *not* one of the Sacred Five, he didn't want to be stuck plucking splinters out of his hand if his stick decided to explode on him.

Finding the dragon line was easy; he could feel the way the wood practically snapped to attention: *Here! This place!* But when he tried to connect it to the *flow* of the qi…

Yet again, the stick tumbled off his finger and onto the table. He sighed.

"You are certain that you are not simply dropping it?"

Wei Wuxian huffed. Really, there was no need to be insulting! "That part is *easy*!" he protested, plucking the rod back up and balancing it on his finger again, this time away from

the map. He deliberately moved his hand back and forth and up and down to demonstrate. "But once it is… ah, resonating with the dragon line? It *will* not stay!"

"Ah." Lan Wangji watched as Wei Wuxian brought his hand back to a resting position – although he kept the stick balanced on his finger, because he was making a *point* here. "The qi of the dragon lines is in motion, correct?"

Wei Wuxian nodded, curious to see where Lan Wangji would take that statement.

The slightest of furrows crossed the man's brow. "Then perhaps the issue is that the I Ching is *too* sensitive," he suggested. "It is a challenge in high-level physics research today; what they seek to observe is so subtle that it is invisible under ordinary conditions. Thus the tools to observe it cannot be used under such circumstances. What they measure is simply too subtle."

"Huh." Wei Wuxian idly swayed his hand back and forth, keeping the upper end of the rod more in less in place, and considered that. There was definitely merit to the idea. One of the challenges of designing his compass had been keeping it from responding to minor things that didn't warrant concern. The technique he was using *should*, in principle, filter out the natural flow of energy… but then again, the whole reason he was doing this was because something in the dragon lines seemed – heh! – *out of balance*, as it were.

So. What to do about it? The first and most obvious answer would be to use a less sensitive tool, but he'd chosen to work with the I Ching rods for their specific *type* of sensitivity. There was a reason that they'd been viewed as divination tools; they responded to energy across a wide area.

Very well then. If he couldn't change the tool without changing techniques entirely, then the next option would be to adjust the handling of the tool.

Stilling his hand so that the stick was perfectly vertical and stable again, he flicked it up into the air, turned his hand over, and caught it on the back of his knuckles, away from the primary qi channels of the fingers. Then he extended his hand over the map again.

Hm. Close, but not quite. This time the energy was *too* diffuse; the stick wasn't connecting with the echo of the dragon lines in the map. Well, that was easy enough to solve – keeping his hand level, he let his index finger drop to ground it directly onto the map.

Ah, that did the trick! He could feel the stick snap into place…

"…huh." He blinked.

Because the I Ching stick had *tilted*.

Not by much. But it was definitely standing at a *slant*. Which was a little odd to look at, because under normal circumstances it would not have stayed balanced at that angle!

Lan Wangji's expression hadn't twitched, but the man had definitely blinked. "Is that what should result?"

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. “Good question.” If he’d actually been dowsing, yes, he might have expected that response. But he was already on the dragon line, not trying to locate it. The rod should have been standing vertical.

Curious, he moved his hand in the direction of the tilt. To his surprise, the tilt *increased* as he moved, rather than straightening out as he expected. So, not the effect of something nearby pulling it out of course. More like it was responding to something that got stronger as he moved towards it—

The connection broke, and the stick toppled off his head and onto the table again. Wei Wuxian huffed; he had gotten distracted and moved his finger off of the dragon line.

Still! That had been an *interesting* result. Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully, tapping his lip as he studied the map. Then he shrugged and began gathering his tools.

Lan Wangji blinked when he began rolling up the map. “You are finished?”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Not even close!” he chuckled. “But I have the trick of it now. The actual mapping will take a while; better to do that when I won’t be interrupted.” Especially now that he had this new wrinkle to puzzle over.

“Also.” He tilted his head towards the open garden door. “It’s a bit too quiet out there.”

“They are meditating,” Lan Wangji noted, standing up from the table as Wei Wuxian did. “Quiet is to be expected…”

“*Auuuugh why is this so hard!*”

Wei Wuxian cackled. “Ah, there it is! Never mind, then!”

Careful not to draw attention, he made his way over to the doorway, and bit back laughter. Lan Jingyi was lying on the flagstones of the garden courtyard in a properly dramatic Sprawl of Despair next to Wen Yuan, staring up at his friend with a look of abject betrayal.

“Seriously, how do you even *do* this?” he was demanding. “I feel like I’m doing long division *in my head*! With *fractions*!”

“Discipline,” Wen Yuan said serenely, posture perfect and expression calm – save for a suspicious *twitch* at the corner of his mouth. “Focus. Diligence.”

Lan Jingyi groaned loudly.

“Picturing the look on Jin Chan’s face when I rock up to graduation on a *flying sword*.”

A moment’s silence.

Lan Jingyi launched himself upright into a proper lotus position. “*Right*,” he said fiercely, face set and determined. “*Ohmmmmm*...”

Wei Wuxian fell back against Lan Wangji's broad chest, too busy breathlessly biting his sleeve to keep himself from laughing out loud to bother staying upright. Lan Wangji being the wonderful man he was, he just huffed a sigh and steered Wei Wuxian back inside so he could close the door.

Once the boys couldn't hear him, Wei Wuxian burst into laughter, doubling over from the force of it. "Oh, that was *perfect*!" he said gleefully, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

"Will that present a problem?" Lan Wangji asked carefully. "As a motive for cultivating, it is not particularly… refined."

Still snickering, Wei Wuxian waved a hand. "It's true that there is a limit to how far… hm. Wanting to score points against another?"

"Spite."

"That! There is a limit to how far spite can take you, or wanting to impress people, or status. Beyond a certain point, you must cultivate because you *choose* to cultivate, for its own sake, not to achieve some other purpose."

That had always been the heart of Jiang Cheng's difficulty with cultivation, he suspected. The truth was, Jiang Cheng *had* been a strong cultivator in his own right... but when all was said and done, his cultivation had always been tangled up in status and power, in expectations he'd internalized from others and a sense of rivalry and the fear of falling behind. Like everything else in his world, his cultivation had been built by his desperate need to prove himself to the never-ending doubts of his own mind. In the end, it was as if his own desperation to *measure up* to inchoate expectations had limited his ability to progress beyond them.

And then Jiang Cheng had lost his core, but not all those beliefs and expectations, and it had been a *mess*.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Wei Wuxian grinned. "But the early steps on the path to cultivation are *hard*. You haven't convinced yourself that it's *possible* yet. So a little bit of extra motivation doesn't hurt… and wanting to show off can be very motivating!"

"…Ah." Lan Wangji pursed his lips slightly, looking torn between intrigue and discontent. "I had not considered that aspect."

Amused, Wei Wuxian poked the man lightly. "Of course you didn't! You and Wen Yuan are very *focused*, in yourselves and on your goals. Lan Jingyi hasn't learned the trick of that yet." Although the foundation was there. You didn't throw yourself into a situation like this one without a clear understanding of what you considered important in your life. Without taking the step beyond *because I should* into *because this is who I am*. Which was impressive at his age, although the forthright temperament probably helped.

"You are kind to take him on as a student," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “I’m not sure I’d call myself *kind*,” he said, amused. “But really, why not train him? The skills will help, even if he decides he doesn’t want to actually cultivate.”

Lan Wangji looked thoughtful. “Do you think that likely?”

Wei Wuxian hummed, considering that. “Possibly? He is the sort to throw himself into whatever he chooses to do, without second thoughts. The question is, can he *keep* that determination, when progress is slow?”

Which was an interesting change. Disciples of a sect generally didn’t simply… decide not to cultivate. For one thing, if you were a member of the clan, cultivation was a filial duty. And if you were accepted into the sect as an outer disciple, then you took on certain obligations along with your training.

Not to mention that you would have to be very desperate to give up the stability and safety of a sect. Although, granted, most junior disciples did have families to return to… but the shame of failure would haunt them even so. More than that, there had been real benefits to cultivating within a sect. It was easier for young disciples to make it through the difficult early stages of cultivation when they were training with a cohort, and could see their seniors progressing through the higher levels. And the sects had access to better quality tools and materials, and techniques that had been refined by time and the combined efforts of generations.

But the world was different today; there were other ways to make one’s way and find success than through the patronage of a high-born clan. He rather liked the thought of students having the freedom to choose *not* to continue cultivation, if so inclined.

“And if he does wish to continue?” Lan Wangji asked. “As you said, he is a very different student than Wen Yuan.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Which isn’t a bad thing!” he noted. “Lan Jingyi is very *active*. He’s the sort that does well when he has things to do. Which would be good for A’Yuan as well; he has a habit of thinking too much.”

Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow slightly, but nodded. “What would you suggest?”

Wei Wuxian huffed a little. That part was tricky. In Yunmeng Jiang, he would usually send those students out on pheasant hunts; they were an effective way to train students to both wait and observe, and to act decisively when the moment came – as well as skills in stealth, and tracking, and using a bow on a moving target. And it always gave rambunctious boys a feeling that they were getting away with something – as well as a built-in reward if they did well, since the cooks would usually collude with him on making sure that whoever brought in game got an extra portion.

But. That assumed that the students in question already had the basic skills they needed – and the open space to hunt. As populated as the area was, they’d have to go fairly far afield to find an undisturbed area with game, and he had no idea what the customs were now!

“If they had swords, I would set him to learning the forms. Or archery; that’s good training for stillness and control,” he mused.

“There are archery schools in Caiyi,” Lan Wangji noted. “However, they are…”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “In *Caiyi*,” he echoed. “I imagine we would draw *lots* of attention!”

“You would not lack for volunteers if you wished to teach more students,” Lan Wangji observed dryly.

“That could be nice,” Wei Wuxian admitted wistfully. He hadn’t really thought about it, but he’d missed having young sprouts to teach, those years in the Burial Mounds. A’Feng’s persistence hadn’t been the only reason why Wei Wuxian had started showing him things. “Although it doesn’t solve the sword problem!”

Granted, swords were not, technically, strictly *necessary* for cultivating a core. But that was the path that he knew the best. And given how enthusiastic they were about sword flight, there might well be rebellion in the ranks if they didn’t get to try it!

Lan Wangji hesitated. “I have not yet explored what options exist.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Well, of course not! That would be difficult when you don’t even know what you’re supposed to be looking for.” He tapped his lip, thinking. “I can describe what I know of the process,” he offered. He was not a smith, he didn’t have the skills to actually forge a spiritual sword. But he did know how it differed from making a mundane blade – and, importantly, he would be able to know if they got it right or wrong. If they did have to reinvent the art from scratch, they would at least not be starting from a completely blank slate.

Which reminded him. “We should speak to Gao Huiqing again, too. If we’re to be dealing with things like those oracle bones regularly, warded robes will come in handy!” Plus, he’d be interested in exploring options for something a little more in line with modern styles. Warded clothing generally did have certain requirements regarding size and complexity to be effective, but it was obvious that *robes* would be very conspicuous now. Which, granted, not necessarily a bad thing, but…

“Are there other tools we should look into?” Lan Wangji asked. “We discussed supplies for talismans previously—”

If by *discussed* he meant that Lan Wangji was a sneaky sneak who kept buying more when Wei Wuxian wasn’t looking!

“—but are there other things? The bells?”

Wei Wuxian was opening his mouth to say *those are more a Jiang thing, really*, when he stopped himself with a strange sense of disorientation. Because… they weren’t anymore, were they? For the simple reason that there *were* no “Jiang” things, because Yunmeng Jiang didn’t exist anymore, and hadn’t for well over a thousand years at least. So…

He grinned. “Why not?” After all, the bells had advantages! They might not be powerful, but they were easy to use and effective – and common people often found them less unsettling than more powerful tools. Given that just the *existence* of cultivation was going to unsettle a lot of people, that was a real concern!

Lan Wangji tilted his head slightly. “I have meant to ask. According to lore, careful regulation of the diet is necessary for cultivation. But you have said nothing of it.”

Wei Wuxian had to laugh at that. “There were certainly many who believed that!” he said wryly, remembering the absolutely *terrible* food from his time as a guest disciple with the Lan. “But I never saw a difference in cultivation due to diet.” Witness the fact that in terms of actual cultivation, Lan disciples with their strict regimen and three thousand rules had actually been no more advanced on average than the disciples of any other sect.

Lan Wangji was waiting, silently curious. So Wei Wuxian took a moment to put his thoughts into order. “I don’t *know*,” he noted, “but I suspect that it’s less a matter of what one does and does not eat than it is a matter of control. Do you control your hungers, or do your hungers control you?” He chuckled. “And really… strict denial can in its own way be a matter of *being* controlled!”

Lan Wangji hummed thoughtfully. “That is true,” he noted.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Really, though, if I were to pick one thing that we really need, it would be space!” he said. “Your home is not that large, Lan Zhan. And your garden is much too nice for sparring with swords!” He huffed. “Not to mention a place to *keep* all those supplies, especially if I do find more students…”

He stopped. Blinked.

“Wei Ying?”

“I just realized,” he murmured, bemused. Because now that he’d realized it, the shape of what they were talking about was obvious. It just… hadn’t occurred to him to actually think in those terms. “We’re talking about founding a sect.”

NOTES:

Confession. Wen Yuan’s line about rocking up to graduation on a flying sword? At least half the reason this fic happened. (Lan Jingyi’s reaction to seeing the video was another one!)

I find it strangely amusing that in a way, fandom does to Jin Guangshan what cultivation society does to Wei Wuxian: he’s cast as the bad guy, so clearly he’s the epitome of moral depravity with no redeeming qualities whatsoever! And as a result, fandom turns him into what I call an “Ick Villain.” You know, the ones who have *literally* no positive qualities, *up to and including competence*, because narratively their sole purpose is to be squashed, guilt-free. Which means people forget that the Jin Guangshan of the novel is a sly politician; Jin

Guangyao comes by his manipulative intelligence *honestly*. I suspect it's a combination of Jin Guangshan being a sexual predator (depravity!), and the fact that unlike a lot of other villains, he never gets to do a Villainous Motivation speech. Not to mention that he's basically the epitome of "status trumps everything."

(Okay, and I suspect part of it is that fanworks tend to default to assigning canon characters their canon roles, which means there are a *lot* of stories out there where Jin Guangshan is the sleazy plotter out to get Wei Wuxian *despite getting no political advantage by it*.)

Sexual predator, yes. Amoral political operator, absolutely. Sleazy scum, no question. But he didn't get the Jin sect to such a position of power by being shortsighted or stupid!

Granted, the other reason I suspect that a lot of people do this is that to truly do Jin Guangshan justice as an antagonist, you have to think *politics*. Which is not something many of us are good at! (Yours truly included. Writing this, I knew I would need at least a hat-tip to the scheming, but to be honest, half the reason I added Nie Huaisang, Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan to the cast was so I could handwave the lion's share of it onto them doing stuff in the background while I focused on Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian!)

The site Lan Wangji recollects is actually based on the Tomizawa Site Museum in Sendai, Japan – which, yes, is a single ancient campfire site they discovered digging the foundation for a school. It's one of the coolest archaeological sites I ever visited, because they actually left the fire marks on the ground intact, built the museum over it, and the exhibit walks you through every tiny detail they analyzed to reconstruct the story of the this one campfire. Which they can do in part *because* it's so small. Definitely worth checking out, although if I recall correctly the English signage was minimal…

Wei Wuxian and talismans: Wei Wuxian as inventor of talismans left and right seems to be a fandom (or maybe CQL?) thing, since the only canonical one he creates in the novel is the lure, which is an adaptation of a standard ward. (I suppose you could count the Painted Eyes technique, but that seems to be more spell than talisman.) But given his general scholarly and innovative tendencies and the fact that the lure is treated as revolutionary despite the actual change to the ward being minimal, I'm inclined to say that he *is* a master of that particular art, and that said mastery is relatively uncommon. There's also the fact that the juniors in Yi City are noted explicitly to *not* be carrying blank talisman paper, while in the Xuanwu of Slaughter fight, Wei Wuxian manages to draw a fire talisman in blood on his hand and activates it by slapping his hand on the rocks. (Implying that he actually drew it *mirror image*…)

Actually, come to think of it, I'm not sure we *ever* see Lan Wangji use a talisman. Silencing spells and pressure points, yes, but…

And while we're on the subject… I've always found it striking that, if you take Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen out of the picture, the Lan disciples don't seem to be any more advanced than the disciples of the other sects. (Or more moral, especially if you're looking at their behavior in the backstory era.) Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi are clearly very well trained, but they don't seem to be *better* trained or stronger than their peers in the Yi City arc… and it's worth remembering that Su Minshan seems to have been a Lan disciple in good standing prior to his decision to leave and found his own sect. I actually wonder if this is part of why

he was never given a name in his early appearances: part of his job was to *be* "the average Lan disciple."

(Though, to be fair, he seems to actually have been remarkably competent. It's just that he's being compared to *Lan Wangji* and *Wei Wuxian* and company… plus, he's so incredibly *petty* that it really grates to give him any credit at all. See what I noted above about Ick Villains!)

Regarding the AU of this AU that Lan Wangji imagines… well. Free plotbunny to a good home! But just a reminder: when Wei Wuxian wakes up in Mo Xuanyu's body, the first thing he does is investigate *everything* in the room to learn everything he possibly can about the situation. Then he sits and meditates for hours to familiarize himself with his new body. He only starts running around when he realizes he has a golden opportunity to test whether or not humiliation is enough to satisfy the terms of the ritual. If he were to wake up in a strange place with no information about where he is or why he was there, he would take the time to *get* that information before jumping into anything!

"Tao masters in ancient times in China used a chopstick that balanced on their index finger to help locate underground water or to find herbal remedies and plants in the wild forests." (https://www.feng-shui.com/en/erdheilung/dowsing-divination.html) This is the only source I've found thus far on dowsing practices in ancient China, so I kind of grabbed it and ran with it! Fun aside: dowsing, at least some forms of it, does in fact work; I've seen professional plumbers do it to locate buried pipes. And it was accurate. Did not expect that.

And while I doubt Wei Wuxian would necessarily enjoy being an academic in the modern sense (especially since academia is prone to many of the same foibles as the sects!), he really does come across as a folklorist of sorts – especially in the Yi City arc, with his gift of chatting up informants for local lore, his lecture to the juniors about the raised lintels on doors, and his Painted Eyes spell… which is a direct reference to a folktale!

Actually, a lot of guidao seems to draw on folklore. Right down to summoning ancestors to intercede. Fun plotbunny: that's what Wen Ning ended up being, a guardian ancestor spirit who just happens to have a body…

Also, an amused side note: at this point, I've more or less wrapped up the language learning plot thread, but I still try to keep Wei Wuxian's vocabulary fairly straightforward, outside of cultivation- and history-related language that he would have picked up (because, after all, his conversational context has been a bit eclectic). Normally, that's not a big deal. But for some reason, this line in particular took me forever: "Possibly? He is the sort to throw himself into whatever he chooses to do, without second thoughts. The question is, can he *keep* that determination, when progress is slow?" …because I had to revise my mental script three times, for words I decided he probably wouldn't have picked up yet: passionate, reservation, and dedication.

Chapter 19: Building Foundations

Chapter Summary

Building a sect – or a research project, or a new life – takes a lot of groundwork.

When Ouyang Zizhen joined the call, he looked *frazzled*, like the hems on his easygoing temperament were wearing thin and had threads sticking out at odd angles.

"So… is anyone else getting totally spammed?" he asked, blinking a little too rapidly.

Lan Jingyi groaned loudly, flopping forward onto the desk. On the screen, Jin Ling pulled a truly incredible face.

Wen Yuan winced. "Nie Huaisang warned me to lock down my accounts before we went public," he admitted. "I haven't looked at them."

"They've set him up with a spam filter that's so tough he's barely even getting emails from school," Lan Jingyi told them, before he added, "and I want a copy of it!"

Ouyang Zizhen hesitated. "I'm, um… not sure that would actually help so much."

Wen Yuan sighed. He'd been trying so hard to *not* think about that. The stuff from his classmates, whatever, he understood that. But some of the stuff he'd gotten from *teachers*...!

"I think Aunt Qing is seriously considering just homeschooling me until I get into a university," he confessed.

That got him startled looks from *all* the guys, even Lan Jingyi; they all knew the deal on how Wen Qing's career didn't give her many options for stuff like that.

Granted, he was pretty sure her career path had taken a hard left into uncharted territory in the past month or two.

"Are you sure that would be okay?" Ouyang Zizhen asked, worrying at his lip. "I mean, you're out of junior middle school, so it's not *mandatory* schooling anymore, but… the Gaokao are going to be coming up soon, right? I know you're doing really well, but…"

"I think it'll be okay," Wen Yuan said. "Even if I don't pass the first time, it's not going to be the end of the world."

Lan Jingyi made a face. "Yeah, like that's gonna happen. Man, I wish I had your confidence."

Wen Yuan shrugged, feeling awkward. *Confidence* really didn't feel like the right word for it. He'd hate to fail, so many people would be disappointed. It was just that it really *wouldn't* be the end of the world if it happened. He wasn't entirely sure now that university was even the right next step for him. What would he study? And the whole situation with Wei Wuxian wasn't going to be resolved in just a year or two. He wanted to be part of that, *helping*. And he definitely didn't want to interrupt his training in cultivation!

Then there was the thing Nie Huaisang had said.

"*Face it, you're in a position where failing is not going to happen, no matter what you do! You were in that video, you're a celebrity now. And frankly? We haven't* said *that you're Wei Wuxian's first cultivation student of the modern age, but we haven't* not *said it either, and that's as good as a signed and sealed confession in certain circles. There are going to be people falling over themselves to give you what you want, if it means they can claim to be involved in reviving* that *particular traditional art. You might as well milk it!*"

Wen Yuan didn't *want* to milk it – the whole conversation had led him with a terrible, bitter taste in his mouth, and he had so much sympathy now for how upset Jin Ling had been when he'd learned that Jin Guangshan had bribed the teachers to skip him a couple grades.

Speaking of whom… Jin Ling was being awfully quiet, fiddling with the purple cord on his charm and not really looking at any of them. Wen Yuan kept an eye on him through the screen, worried but not sure what to say. Leaving school would be hard for Wen Yuan, but not *that* bad. But while Jin Ling was mostly caught up academically by now, the amount of time and effort he'd had to put into it and the bullying when he'd first joined the class meant that he didn't really have any friends outside their little circle.

"Still, that's a *lot* of work to keep up with on your own," Ouyang Zizhen said. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

Lan Jingyi huffed. "I mean, Wei Wuxian helps, which is both weird and awesome…"

Wen Yuan gave him a *look*, and Jingyi winced. "Oh. Right. Eavesdroppers," he mumbled awkwardly. "Sorry."

Wen Yuan sighed ruefully. It was *weird* to imagine that there would be people out there wasting their time by hacking into a video call of a bunch of senior middle school students bellyaching about their homework. Except that with the frenzy of the press release and everything… Well. If he'd had the skills, and the time… he couldn't honestly say he wouldn't have been tempted, too.

Ouyang Zizhen was spluttering, and even Jin Ling had looked up from the silver ball in his hand to stare at them. "Wait, you mean Yi… um, Wei… um, *that guy* is helping you with school stuff? How?!"

Lan Jingyi shot Wen Yuan an apologetic look, and Wen Yuan smiled ruefully. There was no way the guys were going to drop this now. Hopefully if they did get hacked, it wouldn't be too bad?

“I mean, it didn’t *start* that way,” he told them. “He just would watch over my shoulder when I was doing my assignments. And… well, the whole point of school is that this is stuff people should know about, right? So we started going through my textbooks together, and…”

Lan Jingyi puffed his cheeks out. “And that guy picks stuff up *so* fast, it’s crazy! He finished our physics assignment before *we* did yesterday!” He sulked. “And then he wouldn’t help!”

Wen Yuan snickered. “You mean he wouldn’t let you copy his answers.”

“…Okay, yes,” Lan Jingyi admitted, and drooped. “*Man.* I get what you meant now. It’s like, you would *not* think that that guy could pull off a dad vibe! But then he breaks out the *disappointed look* and suddenly you feel like you’re two centimeters tall.”

“It’s even worse when he adds the *sigh*,” Wen Yuan agreed fervently.

“The one that says *I despair of your survival instincts, you obviously need extra training if you’re going to have even a hope of surviving your own teenage foolishness*?” Lan Jingyi shuddered. “Yeah…”

“What did you even *do* to get that reaction?” Jin Ling blurted, staring in disbelief at Wen Yuan.

“Nothing!” both of them said. In unison.

Judging by the skeptical stares that followed, that was not very convincing.

Wen Yuan blinked innocently at them, careful to keep a straight face. So maybe they’d gotten a *little* carried away trying to imitate some of the moves that Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had been working on, but they’d looked so *cool*...

Although, really, keeping a straight face was probably an exercise in futility. Lan Jingyi couldn’t look innocent even when he actually *was*!

Ouyang Zizhen sighed dramatically. “I can’t *believe* I’m missing this! It’s a once in a million years *adventure*, and I’m stuck hanging out on some island paradise!”

That was such a perfect opening for snark that Wen Yuan actually looked expectantly at Jin Ling. But the younger boy was unexpectedly staring at his desk again, biting at his lip and clearly distracted. Feeling weirdly off-balance, Wen Yuan looked back at Ouyang Zizhen. “I… honestly could do with a little less adventure,” he said.

“That’s fair,” Ouyang Zizhen admitted after a moment’s hesitation. “I mean… okay, my dad is going *nuts*, he keeps talking about how we’re missing the event of the century and we should just end the whole trip right now—”

There was a moment of collective grimaces at that. Ouyang Zizhen’s father was a reasonably successful businessman with much bigger aspirations and, well, not always a lot of self-reflection in his constant effort to get *in* on the Next Big Thing. “What’s your mom saying?” Lan Jingyi asked.

Ouyang Zizhen grinned. “That we should start applying for citizenship *anywhere else*. And maybe change our names while we’re at it. Which, you know, that does sound kinda cool, too!” He huffed. “I do see where she’s coming from. The stuff from the people at school, sure, they know we’re friends and all. But I’ve gotten some messages from some seriously *random* people. Seriously, who goes digging into a school kid’s friend group just to try to get a scoop on someone the friends haven’t even met?”

Sitting next to Lan Jingyi, Wen Yuan could hear his friend’s nervous gulp. He had to agree. If people were harassing Ouyang Zizhen when he was *overseas*, that implied some scary things about what could have happened if Lan Jingyi had stayed down in Caiyi. “I think I might be with your mom on this one,” he admitted.

Ouyang Zizhen hesitated, enthusiasm for the excitement warring with his knowledge of just how dangerous things could get. *Had* gotten. Wen Yuan had already had to soothe their friend down from a borderline panic attack when Su Minshan had fired the gun in the video. And while they hadn’t really gone into specifics about the *other* scary thing, Wen Yuan knew that Nie Mingjue had reached out to the families to warn them about taking extra precautions.

“Yeah, I hear that,” Ouyang Zizhen admitted, and looked at Jin Ling. “How have you been doing? Is your grandfather even letting you go outside now?”

Jin Ling grimaced. Then he stiffened his shoulders and straightened. “First, let me say that this was *not* my idea,” he declared hotly. “But… um. About that…”

With a precisely calculated motion, he pushed the reaching hand aside and shifted his free hand to strike—

“Stop.”

Familiar now with the rhythm of these practice sessions, Lan Wangji immediately did so, stilling himself in place mid-strike.

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow at him. “Now. What’s wrong with this picture?”

Wrong?

Lan Wangji frowned, holding his stance even as Wei Wuxian stepped back to disengage. The man’s methods sometimes seemed cryptic or even whimsical, but there was always a method to them. If he said something was wrong, then it was. The problem was, Lan Wangji could not see where he had erred. His form was solid, his stance perfectly balanced and stable—

Oh. That *was* the error. “I should not have been able to stop so easily.” Not in the middle of a strike meant to put an attacker down hard.

Wei Wuxian smiled and tilted his head. “Exactly,” he said, as Lan Wangji returned to a resting stance – although he remained alert. Sometimes Wei Wuxian would reinitiate a spar in the middle of conversation, to demonstrate a point or even simply to test Lan Wangji’s

reflexes and readiness. “Your technique is based on balance and control, which suits you. But you have a habit of *too much* control. It limits your ability to send strength outwards – both physically and in terms of qi.”

Lan Wangji nodded slowly and stepped back, a signal that he wished to contemplate Wei Wuxian’s words.

When he’d agreed to let Wei Wuxian teach him self-defense, he’d pictured… well. Something like a martial arts class. Drilling a particular set of moves and forms.

And there had been some of that. But mostly, the training had consisted of Wei Wuxian letting Lan Wangji choose the shape of his movements, and then helping him refine it. And that often had as much to do with how Lan Wangji *approached* a situation as it did the position of his hands and feet.

The reason, the cultivator had explained, was that certain forms and styles lent themselves to certain temperaments. Different people had different baseline strengths and weaknesses and preferences. Wei Wuxian’s style was dynamic, built around flow and motion and momentum. It suited him. But Lan Wangji reflexively sought stability, wanted to be *grounded* both physically and mentally. A preference that Tai Chi was very suited to, so why mess with what worked?

“*Technique you have already,*” Wei Wuxian had told him. “*What you need to learn is less a matter of motion than of mindset.*”

Which… was true. Physical strength and muscular control, Lan Wangji had. But when it came to mentality…

“I first came to Tai Chi in an effort to control my temper,” Lan Wangji admitted. “It is… difficult to let go of that.”

He had a long, long history of defaulting to aggressive behavior when frustrated or overwhelmed. Although he had, at least, outgrown his habit of biting rather than talking by the time he entered formal schooling. Mostly.

Hitting an early growth spurt that had left him substantially taller than his cohort and most of the upperclassmen had also helped.

He had, by now, come to far better terms with his temper’s violent impulses – not to mention certain *other* impulses that did tend to the aggressive side. But the habit of checking himself was well established by now.

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. “Well. Controlling one’s temper is certainly better than the alternative – particularly when you have a weapon at hand! And even when you do not have a *weapon*, a cultivator is always armed. With strength and speed, if nothing else.”

Unbidden, the image of those layered laceration scars on Wei Wuxian’s back flashed through Lan Wangji’s mind. He still didn’t know the story behind those scars; other than the medical exam that morning after Wei Wuxian awakened from the ice, he’d only seen them when

they'd visited Gao Huiqing, and that had absolutely *not* been an appropriate time or place for such a conversation. But Wen Qing had quietly shared her suspicions about their origins with him, and… reading between the lines of some of the comments Wei Wuxian had made, he had the feeling that she wasn't wrong.

"However," Wei Wuxian continued. "Do not forget that control also means *limitations*. Which means that if you are always controlling yourself, you are also always *limiting* yourself." Grinning, he skipped forward to poke Lan Wangji's nose lightly. "And cultivation is about *overcoming* one's limits!"

Accustomed by now to the man's casually tactile tendencies, Lan Wangji pushed his hand aside with an amused huff, but he did take a moment to turn those words over in his mind. Philosophically, it did make sense… and more to the point, the objective of this training was for Lan Wangji to be able to defend himself should there be another kidnapping attempt. And the unfortunate reality was that if he was going to actually *defend* himself, warding off attacks would not be sufficient. He needed to be able to put an attacker *down*, at least long enough to run.

Wei Wuxian pouted playfully at him, before clasping his hands behind his head with a sigh. "It's too bad we don't have swords," he commented. "Learning to project your qi into a sword is a good way to learn how to project in other ways."

That was logical. Unfortunately… having spent an evening discussing the basics of making a spiritual sword, Lan Wangji increasingly suspected that they would in fact need to *recreate* the art. Apparently, much like cultivation itself, the technique had been carefully guarded by the smiths who practiced it. Which did not mean that they were entirely out of options; as Wei Wuxian had pointed out, someone had to have figured out how to make the swords in the first place; cultivators would have started out with mundane blades. At least now they *knew* that spiritual swords could be made. That alone was a strong starting point.

Although with regard to the discussion at hand… "You said that cultivation by the path of the sword was traditional," Lan Wangji observed. "That seems… counterintuitive, if cultivation requires condensing and refining qi, but the sword requires projection."

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Ah, but that is only the *first* step," he said. "As you cultivate, you learn that your qi does not stop at your skin. Qi is part of how we touch the world around us; that is true of all people, not just cultivators. The difference is that cultivators are *aware* of it."

Lan Wangji nodded thoughtfully. That was consistent with qigong theories – the concept of a qi field that extended beyond the physical body. "Then projecting through an object is a part of learning that mode of interacting with the world," he said, testing his understanding.

"Partly," Wei Wuxian confirmed. "But also… well."

Turning, he walked over to where he'd left his sword leaning against the edge of the veranda. He didn't wear it regularly – as he had noted with dry amusement, that would be the *opposite* of inconspicuous, at a time when he was relying heavily on his ability to pass as just another

graduate student to keep from being effectively trapped in the Jingshi. But he did tend to keep it nearby, ever since the kidnapping attempt.

"*I can call it to me, if it's really necessary*," he'd explained. "*But it might put a few holes in the walls along the way. Better to avoid that!*"

Wei Wuxian picked the sword up by its sheath and turned, extending the hilt towards Lan Wangji. "Try it," he suggested.

Lan Wangji hesitated, torn between an atavistic sense of reverence and his own curiosity… as well as a bit of wariness at the mischievous sparkle in grey eyes. Wei Wuxian simply waited, and finally Lan Wangji gingerly wrapped his fingers around the offered hilt and tugged lightly.

The sword didn't move. Frowning, Lan Wangji pulled again, more firmly this time – then, accepting the sword from Wei Wuxian, gripped the scabbard himself and pulled as hard as he could.

It didn't even rattle.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Your qi doesn't just *touch* the world around you. When you use something for a long time, or channel power through it, your qi eventually becomes part of it. And that can have interesting effects!"

Taking the sword back, he set his hand on the grip – and the blade rang free in a smooth, effortless motion.

Lan Wangji blinked, suddenly remembering Jin Zixun's cursing – right before the sword had unsheathed seemingly of its own accord. "You are the only one who can use it," he concluded, struck. "Is that characteristic of spiritual swords?"

Wei Wuxian laughed, returning the sword to its sheath. "It's something we knew *could* happen – a cultivator becoming so strong that their sword is sealed against the hand of anyone else. But it was supposed to take decades of cultivation! Most cultivators handed their spiritual weapons down through their families. I don't think I'd heard of a living person who had actually pulled it off until… well." He laughed wryly. "I was rather surprised when I discovered that Suibian was sealed!"

That was fascinating. And yet Lan Wangji couldn't help… "*Suibian*?" Surely he hadn't heard that correctly.

Wei Wuxian cackled at his reaction. "No, that really is its name!" he insisted. "I was so excited to be getting my sword, I came up with dozens of different names and I couldn't decide. So when Sect Leader Jiang asked, I told him to name it whatever! And…" Grinning, he turned the sword in his hand to show Lan Wangji the characters.

Lan Wangji nodded slowly, feeling… oddly conflicted. On the one hand, it was clearly a fond memory for Wei Wuxian. And it was not an unsuitable name, if one considered the spiritual connotations: freedom from the myriad of distractions born of the mortal world.

Except that Wei Wuxian's reply had been too easy. Clearly, this was an explanation he'd had to give many times. Which meant that, spiritual connotations aside, the people of his own time and culture had also found it… irreverent.

Based on what Wei Wuxian had said about swords binding to their wielders and being passed down through families, a sword was expected to be a lifelong possession. And the Jiang sect leader had chosen to bestow Wei Wuxian's sword with a name that could be so easily misconstrued, for the sake of an inside joke? He could not imagine doing the same if Wen Yuan had made a similar request.

Still chuckling, Wei Wuxian set the sword aside and turned back to look at Lan Wangji. "But!" he said, and Lan Wangji set his thoughts aside for later consideration; they were still in the midst of training, after all. "The point is that cultivating is not just a matter of your own qi. It's also connected to the qi around you. That's why the Cold Springs were good for cultivation." He smiled wryly. "And that's where controlling yourself too much can become a problem. Connection requires contact with something you don't control."

It… was perhaps an unfortunate inevitability that Lan Wangji's mind immediately jumped to a very *specific* option for "connecting." An option that he quickly crushed into a locked box in the back of his mind and *sat* on, because he was *absolutely* not going to bring it up.

For that matter, he had no idea if dual cultivation was actually possible. Yes, there had been quite a few religious Daoism cults that had preached sexual practices as a path to immortality throughout history. That didn't mean they had anything to do with actual cultivation. He already knew from Wei Wuxian that misinformation about cultivation had been rampant among the laypeople of his time, and… well. *People are gonna people*, as Lan Jingyi would put it. Assuming that the subject matter didn't strike the boy dumb with sheer mortification.

And Lan Wangji could not think of any way to ask Wei Wuxian about the subject without sounding like he was either fishing for salacious secrets or… well, propositioning him.

Deliberately turning his mind away from that dangerous and thoroughly unhelpful line of thought, Lan Wangji said, "Musical cultivation, perhaps? It will not help with defense, but it does require channeling qi through an external object."

Wei Wuxian grinned slyly. "That it does! And I wouldn't be so quick to assume that it couldn't help with defense, if you choose."

Lan Wangji stared flatly at him. He knew perfectly well when he was being baited.

Wei Wuxian sparkled innocently at him for a moment – there really was no better word for it – before he laughed and obligingly answered the silent question. "To be fair, it would require a properly developed core to use the techniques; they take a lot of qi. But musical cultivation *can* be used in combat."

Lan Wangji blinked. "That seems… cumbersome," he said after a long moment, trying to picture carrying a *guqin* into battle.

Wei Wuxian snickered. “Oh yes,” he said wryly. “I definitely prefer the dizi!” Then he grinned, tapping his cheek. “But a guqin does have other advantages. Lan Yi had some *very* scary tricks up her sleeve. Chord Assassination was no joke.”

Chord Assassination? Several mental images flashed through Lan Wangji’s mind at that name, and none of them were pleasant.

“Besides – a guqin may be large and heavy, but that does have advantages,” Wei Wuxian added, all bright mischief. “I believe that Lan Yi simply hit an enemy over the head with hers at least once or twice!”

“I will not be doing that,” Lan Wangji said, deadpan. He preferred his instrument *intact*, thank you.

“Better to wait until you master projecting your qi to keep it from breaking,” Wei Wuxian agreed wryly, before shaking his head. “But it’s worth remembering that it’s always an option in a pinch! For now, let’s get back to practicing how to strike with your *hands*.” His lips quirked. “Before our easily impressed teenagers finish talking to their friends and try to be sneaky about imitating us… again.”

Lan Wangji settled into stance again, but couldn’t help a flash of amusement. “I do not think they will be so foolish a second time.”

“They are teenagers,” Wei Wuxian said confidently. “It will take more than that.”

“Jin Guangshan wishes to send his grandson here? Is the man insane?!”

Wen Qing barely bit back a snort of dry amusement. Apparently the press conference had finally driven home to Lan Qiren just *how* volatile the public reaction to this whole mess was.

“He’s *plotting*,” she corrected. “If his ‘beloved’ grandson is here, then that gets his foot in the door to involve himself in the project as a whole. People will make allowances for a doting grandfather that they’d never tolerate from a meddling politician.”

She just wished she *could* believe that Jin Guangshan was simply being a meddlesome doting grandfather. But with the close friendship that Wen Yuan had with Jin Ling, she’d witnessed for herself just how much damage Jin Guangshan’s mercenary approach to PR had wrought.

According to Wen Yuan, Jin Ling was fully aware of the fact that this was just another one of his grandfather’s schemes for power and influence – to the point that Jin Ling had asked them to say no.

But…

“We do have a precedent,” she pointed out. “We brought Jingyi here because his friendship with Wen Yuan made him a potential target.”

Lan Qiren scowled. “As if the security on a simple university campus could compare to the estates of someone like Jin Guangshan,” he scoffed.

Actually, it probably did, at least as far as the Jingshi was concerned. If only because no one knew exactly what Wei Wuxian was capable of or how to counter it yet. “That won’t stop him from raising accusations of nepotism against the project, given that *Lan* Jingyi was allowed to come.”

“He is hardly the only one,” Lan Qiren complained. “Your own brother is staying on campus!”

So he was, along with the families of most of the project researchers. Although she suspected her brother had taken the offer less out of worries about harassment and more to make certain that she wasn’t reverting to her med school habits of surviving on tea, instant meals, dark chocolate and sleep deprivation.

She’d intended to complain about his lack of faith, but he’d checked her bare refrigerator and then looked at her with big, woeful eyes. Cheater.

“He’s not,” she agreed. “And that won’t *matter*, if Jin Guangshan gets a chance to turn this into a matter of theater rather than facts.” Which hurt her head, frankly… but watching Nie Huaisang orchestrate the whole reveal had driven home something that she’d only ever really considered on an intellectual level: on a fundamental level, most people didn’t care about facts. Not really. They had *feelings*, and they latched onto whatever facts made them feel justified in their feelings and found ways to dismiss everything else.

Lan Qiren paused, eyeing her disbelievingly. “Doctor Wen. Surely you don’t think this is a good idea.”

She made a face. “Not a good idea, no… but it is worth considering. If Jin Guangshan wins either way, we might as well pick the option that gives us what we want. Jin Ling is a good kid. And I know Wen Yuan is worried about him.”

Her young cousin had dutifully passed along Jin Ling’s worries about his grandfather’s scheming, but Wen Yuan’s own preference had been obvious even without Lan Jingyi hanging around looking hopeful in the background.

Lan Qiren’s scowl softened a bit. No surprise; Wen Qing was well aware that the man was already in the habit of considering Wen Yuan as effectively his own grandnephew and making plans accordingly. The sheer presumption was a bit irritating – she took her responsibilities as guardian seriously! – but…

Well. To be honest, she wouldn’t be opposed to making it official. She *did* take her responsibilities seriously, and that meant she was acutely aware of the fact that her and Wen Ning’s living situation was not ideal for Wen Yuan; they tried their best, but both of them tended to work long hours or on extended trips, and their combined income wasn’t *quite* enough to cover the rent on an apartment large enough for Wen Yuan to have the space that a teenager needed.

If Wen Yuan had fallen in with a bad crowd and gotten himself into trouble, they would have only had themselves to blame. But somehow, he’d instead ended up with his tight-knit group of good-hearted kids, and a surrogate father-figure in the form of Lan Wangji. He’d also

bonded with Wei Wuxian, and between the acculturation assistance and Lan Wangji's cultivation lessons, she suspected that the two men were going to be working together for a long time to come. And Wen Yuan would want to be there as well.

Lan Qiren huffed loudly, and Wen Qing drew her wandering thoughts back to the moment. "I do *not* want people seeing the project as a place to send unattended children for the summer!"

In this case, unattended is preferable to the alternative, she thought wryly.

However, she knew the sound of permission grumpily granted. "I'll consult with Nie Huaisang," she offered. "He can probably come up with some way to spin it so that it looks like we're doing Jin Guangshan a favor." The man had plenty of rivals who would eagerly take potshots at him if they thought it would chip away at his influence so they could build their own. Surely some of them would see an opportunity to tut and tsk over Jin Guangshan sending his young grandson into such a messy situation.

She just wished that she could take him sending Jin Ling here as evidence that Jin Guangshan wasn't involved in the attempted kidnapping or other problems, or at least that he'd decided on a different strategy, now that the first attempt had failed. But frankly, she didn't trust that the man wouldn't send his grandson into danger if he thought he would benefit from it.

She hoped not. From what Wen Yuan had said, for all that Jin Ling presented himself as tough and mercenary, the boy was desperate for some sort of family.

Sighing, she set that aside and shifted her focus back to the initial purpose of this meeting. "Lan Wangji and I completed the review of the project proposals with Wei Wuxian." Which had been a little painful, once they'd finally narrowed down the core problem at the heart of the project. But the internal politics of the project itself demanded that they be thorough.

Her face must have given some of her thoughts away, because Lan Qiren's lips pursed. "And?" he asked curtly, clearly aware that he wasn't going to like what she was going to say.

So she gave it to him straight. "He's happy to help, but he thinks they're ridiculous questions to be asking him. And he's right."

Lan Qiren scowled – but, interestingly, he didn't *bristle* the way she'd expected. "All of them meet the standards of academic rigor and your ethical guidelines."

"On paper, yes," she agreed. "But it's still blatantly obvious that all of them are modifications of research plans originally intended for the study of a frozen body. None of them are appropriate research to conduct with a living eyewitness." She shook her head. "Director, if *those* are the first papers that come out of an extraordinary opportunity like this, the project is going to be an academic laughingstock."

Lan Qiren grimaced. "I am aware," he admitted stiffly. "But the researchers cannot completely change their research in only two months, and I cannot ask the participants to leave empty-handed."

“I do understand that.” And she did; the researchers on the project had invested time, money, and academic capital to be part of it. “But given such an unexpected initial result, no one is going to be surprised if you do a complete overhaul of the second phase of the project. That’s even in line with the original plans.”

After all, there had always been a degree of uncertainty about what would happen after the initial thaw was complete, since no one knew for certain how stable Yiling Laozu’s body would be or what they would find once they began studying him more closely. Granted, *he’s alive!* was a much bigger shift than anyone could have expected, but a reassessment of the project had always been part of the plan.

Lan Qiren stroked his beard. “That is a good point,” he said. “I am not unaware of the deficiencies in the project’s current structure. The greatest challenge will be to ensure that we can continue to meet the project’s established commitments, particularly the grant obligations.”

Wen Qing didn’t roll her eyes – after all, the man had a point. Most of the grant money had already been spent building the facilities and acquiring the equipment for the project; the unexpected outcome didn’t change those expenditures. Granted, she doubted that there would be that much backlash over the change in priorities, but they did still owe due diligence.

“We can publish the main findings of the first phase with all participants as authors,” she pointed out. Granted, the biggest result had already been made public – but then again, it wasn’t like anyone on the project could really lay claim to having made *that* particular discovery. But there were other results they could publish. The effectiveness of the thawing system. The analysis of the ice. And certain basics about Wei Wuxian himself, even, based on observation.

(They’d asked him if that would be acceptable. He’d fallen over laughing. After all, most of those “discoveries” were things that the people of his own time would have known just by looking at him, or fell into the category of common knowledge.)

“We should also publish an initial paper on the veracity of cultivation,” Lan Qiren said, to her surprise. “I suppose it would be best if you, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian co-authored that.”

Wen Qing fought to keep her eyebrows from flying up in surprise. “I had assumed you would want to conduct more formal studies before we got into that,” she admitted. None of the project’s official announcements had mentioned it. Although they had included Wei Wuxian’s catch of the bullet in the video they’d released to the public, and she knew that more than a few people had noticed it. But that was still at the level of “hey, you don’t think…?”, rather than anything formally confirmed.

It did make her feel a little better about how long it had taken her to connect the dots. Even with the evidence right in front of you, accepting that something you *knew* was fiction might actually be reality was… difficult.

Lan Qiren grimaced. “I would prefer to do so,” he grumbled. “However, it is also imperative that we release a report on the risks of the oracle bones that you discovered, Doctor Wen, and we cannot do that until we have addressed the more fundamental issue of cultivation itself.”

Ouch. That was a very good point. They were already facing an uphill battle when it came to any discussion of cultivation. Add in the idea of resentful energy as a looming threat, and people would be stopping their ears and rejecting everything simply because they didn't want to face the implications.

"I also wish to commission Wei Wuxian to continue his work in the collections," Lan Qiren admitted. "And that will be easier once cultivation and the risks of resentful energy are better understood."

Wen Qing did raise her eyebrows at that. "I thought the oracle bones had been neutralized."

The man sighed heavily. "So Wei Wuxian said. However, I am concerned that they may have only been the most obvious source. It would make sense that other objects, particularly those used in ritual practices, may be similarly contaminated." He hesitated. "In addition… I have been reviewing the records, and there are several items I would like to request his opinion on. Particularly in light of what he has told us of the history of Cloud Recesses and the Gusu Lan sect. I am given to understand that he has already identified at least one artifact from that period. It is possible that we retain others."

Wen Qing looked down at her notes to hide a smile that she suspected the man would not appreciate. Sometimes it was very obvious that Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren were related.

"So. Three major papers, and perhaps permission for project participants to publish any research pertaining to the first phase of the project only." Lan Qiren nodded. "And I assume that you have recommendations for the next phase."

"Some," she agreed. "The biggest is more a variation on something we were already discussing, which was adding an ethnographer to the project. Given that Wei Wuxian is, effectively, the last survivor of his culture, that's still an imperative. But we should look for someone with experience in doing oral histories in particular. In fact, I would bring them on first to help us restructure the project, given that this is outside our immediate area of expertise."

She braced herself as Lan Qiren grimaced again. This was the tricky part, since admitting to a lack of expertise was unlikely to sit well with Lan Qiren's pride, no matter how factually true it might be. But to her relief, he nodded.

"We can use the list of questions they have already submitted as a starting point for that," he noted. "That will give some continuity to the phases of the research. We can also offer participants in the first phase of the project advance access to the completed history, and perhaps the right to favored consideration for future research. That should settle our obligations on that account." He pursed his lips. "The difficulty will be in finding an appropriate lead for the second phase. It is not a field I have much experience in. I had originally intended to advertise the opening, but…"

Wen Qing huffed. "I imagine you're already being inundated with applications."

"Impatient, *presumptuous*... I have had to pull Mo Xuanyu from his research work to act as an administrative assistant simply to monitor all these ridiculous requests!" Lan Qiren's

nostrils flared, before he visibly settled himself.

“You might ask Lan Wangji if he can make any recommendations,” Wen Qing commented. “Ethnographic interviews would have been part of his folklore degree.”

Lan Qiren made a sour face. “Well. Needs must,” he grumbled ungraciously. “When will he be available for consultation?”

“Probably not until tomorrow,” Wen Qing admitted. “I believe that he and Wei Wuxian are reviewing our security arrangements with Nie Mingjue this afternoon.”

Lan Qiren huffed. “Well. If young Jin Ling will be joining us as well, then a security review is indeed in order…”

Wei Wuxian chuckled wryly. “I suppose some things truly don’t change. The minute something is forbidden, there will be *someone* plotting to make a profit by it!”

Nie Mingjue snorted. *Pithy way to put it.* “I’m guessing you have some experience dealing with this sort of thing,” he said.

Wei Wuxian straightened his shoulders in mock offense. “Of course not! Lotus Pier was a *respectable* port! Only merchants in good standing would dare enter the waters of a powerful sect!” He paused, eyes glittering amusement. “Of course, who they were *beyond* our waters was not *our* problem.”

Heh. Yeah right. Oh, sure, there’d probably been a certain amount of greasing hands and convenient looking the other way, that was part and parcel of pretty much any trade port even today. But only an idiot didn’t keep an eye on that sort, and Wei Wuxian was no idiot.

On the other hand, there was a certain cold practicality to it. From what he’d gathered, the cultivation sects had functionally operated as competing power centers. So as long as troublemakers didn’t make the trouble on *your* turf… well, odds were good that there was other trouble to worry about in plenty, so why make more for yourself? Especially if intervention would only benefit a rival.

Wei Wuxian continued slowly scrolling through the article Nie Mingjue had provided as a reference, skimming more than reading with a rueful smile playing at the corner of his mouth. “I admit, our respectable merchants were not *quite* so well-armed, however.”

“I imagine they were armed enough,” Nie Ming said wryly. “But yeah. People are good at finding ways to get rid of other people with prejudice, and they’ve had fifteen hundred years to up their game.”

Although he had to admit, they’d had a fun afternoon digging through the technical mechanics of it all. He’d walked Wei Wuxian through disassembling and reassembling the small firearms that his people carried – well, more watching Wei Wuxian walk himself through it, while they talked firing mechanics and ammunition types. He’d even found a quiet spot where Wei Wuxian could actually try shooting using the non-lethal rounds – although

that had turned into an interesting discussion about the difference between non-lethal and *safe*, because Wei Wuxian knew his archery ballistics well enough to suss out how much *damage* the safety rounds could potentially do.

Nie Mingjue was just glad that Wei Wuxian clearly grasped just how powerful even a simple firearm could be. If not entirely surprised. After all, Wei Wuxian was the one who had pulled off that impossible catch; he more than anyone understood what he was up against.

And that had been a single bullet from a relatively low-powered handgun. As compared to the wide variety of firearms that Wei Wuxian was currently looking through, while they discussed the contexts where they might appear.

He did have to admit, though… sure, the reasons they were doing this sucked, but it was kind of fun to spend an afternoon with a guy who appreciated the mechanics. Wei Wuxian liked poking at how stuff worked.

The cultivator swiped through another screen, humming thoughtfully. "And these all use gunpowder?" He tapped his lip, eyes glinting. "That can be tricky stuff…"

Which was the other fun part. Wei Wuxian didn't just look at how stuff worked, he thought about *applications*. "Less tricky now than the black powder you would've had," Nie Mingjue cautioned him. And wasn't *that* a headspinner, finding out that the cultivation sects had been working with the stuff? Granted, not as implausible as some of the other things they'd learned; alchemists had been messing with sulfur and saltpeter in combinations that went boom for centuries before the Tang started throwing rockets around.

Look, he wasn't a nerd. But he was pretty sure *everyone* on the project had been doing a lot of background reading the past month or two!

Wei Wuxian laughed. "That makes sense. No one wants to handle something that might blow up in their face!" He swiped through another set of pictures. "But you certainly have quite the variety now."

"Some of that is different makers, some of it is different priorities," Nie Mingjue explained. "And some of it is specialization. You don't want something delicate if you're going to be slogging through sand and mud for weeks, and you don't want single-shot precision when you're dealing with a target-rich environment. And you should check out the ranges on the sniper rifles."

"Hm." Wei Wuxian's eyes narrowed. "I'll do that." He smiled crookedly. "I pulled off stopping the bullet that first day by paying *very* close attention to the man holding the weapon – and a lot of luck! I really would rather not rely on that again."

Fair. Nie Mingjue wouldn't want to, either. And given that apparently Wei Wuxian had very nearly been killed by an arrow, defending yourself from a surprise attack from a distance was tough even for a cultivator.

"Most of the more powerful weapons are restricted to the military," Lan Wangji said. "In fact, private ownership of any form of firearm is strictly regulated." The faintest line of a furrow

crossed his brow. “However…”

Wei Wuxian snorted. “That doesn’t exactly help when your enemies don’t really care about laws in the first place.”

Nie Mingjue grimaced. “I’ll be honest,” he said grimly. “If things get messy enough, or someone pulls the strings hard enough, it’s possible that the actual military might get involved. And in some places and levels, the line between legitimate and criminal can get very blurry.”

That got him a look of dry amusement. “As I said. Some things don’t change.”

Again, fair. Armies in Wei Wuxian’s time had done at least as much pillaging as fighting – still did, sometimes. There was a reason Sunzi’s *Art of War* had hammered so hard on the *pragmatism* of setting rules of conduct in wartime. Although as one internet wag had put it, the whole book was one long, irritable *as per my last email* aimed at bookish bureaucrats and power-hungry aristocrats who wouldn’t know long-term strategy – or logistics – if it hit them over the head.

Wei Wuxian sighed, setting the tablet aside and clasping his hands behind his head. “Well, if your People’s Republic is following the example of the First Emperor in controlling people who can fight, that could get awkward,” he commented. “I doubt they’ll enjoy cultivators running about any more than the nobles of my time!”

Lan Wangji blinked. “Were cultivators not nobility themselves?”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Well, the great clans certainly thought so!” he said, amused. “But when they *began*, well. The Gusu Lan were founded by a monk who left his temple. The Yunmeng Jiang were founded by a rogue cultivator, the Lanling Jin by merchants…” He shook his head. “The northern lords didn’t care so much, but the southern? They never let the sects forget that!” He raised an eyebrow. “If there was *trouble*, or they felt like showing off their connections, or otherwise thought they had something to gain by it – then we might be welcome. But mostly? The sects were too powerful to be enemies and not lofty enough to be allies. It made everyone tetchy!”

Oh, Nie Mingjue could just imagine. Status only *counted* if you could lord it over someone in some way, and cultivators would have been simultaneously too dangerous to mess with and too dangerous to leave alone – not to mention too tempting as potential assets. But like it or not, lords in Wei Wuxian’s time would have at least nominally been accustomed to limits on their power, if only in the form of powerful neighbors they had to deal with. Modern officials, accustomed to a supposedly flattened hierarchical structure that meant they had power over *everyone*, would be potentially even worse.

Although now he was intrigued. “Cultivators? Plural?”

Wei Wuxian’s laugh had a rueful note. “I just realized recently – between A’Yuan, Lan Zhan, and now Lan Jingyi… For all intents and purposes, I’ve started a new sect and didn’t realize it!” He shrugged, openly bemused. “Which is… strange. I know how the sects *worked*, but that was then. I imagine things wouldn’t work the same way today!”

…Whoa.

Nie Mingjue had to give himself a minute to boggle at that. Because yeah, there'd been plenty of talk about wanting to learn that stuff, and his little brother had definitely been cackling to himself about setting up support structures… but somewhere in there he hadn't quite made the connection between *learning cultivation* and, well, the fact that Wei Wuxian would be *teaching students*.

Which also meant making a *place* to teach them. Yeah, thinking about it… that could potentially get messy.

Although maybe not quite as messy as the movies would make one think. Superhero stories aside, there was a reason governments and militaries weren't chasing super soldier holy grails. The hard truth of the matter was that in a world where city-annihilating bombs could be dropped out of the stratosphere and detonated in midair, and the average soldier carried guns that could pump out hundreds of bullets per minute, and artillery could take out tanks with better armor than the average city wall… supersoldiers just weren't a serious game changer, not unless you could churn them out *en masse*.

Granted, the slightest peep of interest and special forces would be all over the guy. But given the level of training involved and the fact that there was no assurance that a cultivator would have the right personality for the job… Well, if Wei Wuxian set up a school, odds were good there'd be recruiters hanging around, but other than that, it wouldn't really be worth the effort to take it over.

Which didn't mean the government wouldn't meddle for other reasons. Governments in general tended to take a very jaundiced view of armed enclaves showing up on their turf, and the People's Republic in particular had a history of cracking down hard on anything that resembled an independent power base, physically or ideologically.

Not that going elsewhere really offered much by way of options. Most places weren't any happier about people with swords than China, and they tended to be touchy about immigrants to boot. The USA… hah. They'd be smug as hell if Wei Wuxian set up shop there, right up until they were shocked – shocked! – when the crazies came out of the woodwork in droves, screeching about the evil Satanic Chinese cult brainwashing children. Yeah, hard pass. At least in China, he had the cachet of being *their* impossibility, teaching an ancient lost art that was *their* heritage. Culture snobbery alone gave him some chance of, if not support, at least a modicum of breathing room.

"How large were the sects?" Lan Wangji asked.

Wei Wuxian laughed. "It varied a lot! Some were just a small family. But the sects…" He tapped his lip. "The great sects generally numbered… perhaps three, four hundred, at our strongest?" He shrugged. "A little more for the Wens – they were the largest, before the war. But most of the sects were much smaller. Less than a hundred cultivators."

Huh. For some reason, he'd pictured something bigger. Then again, odds were that with all their abilities, cultivators wouldn't bother fighting as rank and file. Besides, just because it was a war between *sects* didn't mean ordinary people didn't get dragged into it – even if they

didn't get drafted, well, there was no such thing as *neutral* when you were caught in a crossfire.

Still. He could see where Lan Wangji was going with this. "These days, that's basically a pretty successful martial arts school," he noted. "It's not quite a fit, martial arts usually aren't quite so intense, but it's a paradigm you can lean into. Besides, most people have an *idea* of what cultivation training ought to look like, that'll help cover the gaps." Oh, there would be whiners who wanted to cut straight to the awesome without doing the work that made it possible, but those types were everywhere. Wei Wuxian had dealt with actual nobles, an entitled brat with little emperor syndrome was unlikely to phase him.

Which he supposed was another argument for staying based in China; the xianxia fandom might skew younger and a bit counterculture, but everyone knew the basic concepts. If kids started commuting to school by sword, there'd probably be a whole lot of *argh* and crackdowns with flying regulations, but it would be an *of course they would* sort of argh, not *black magic!* Never underestimate the power of pop culture and brand recognition, as his brother would put it.

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, humming thoughtfully. "You'll have to tell me more about how those work," he noted. "But… I should also consider *where* we would be. If a cultivation sect is likely to draw trouble, it would be ungrateful to try to build it here."

Lan Wangji frowned at that, but Nie Mingjue had to agree with Wei Wuxian. Integrating a school of cultivation into the university would be a mess in terms of both physical space and priorities. Not to mention the media attention; the summer break would be ending in just a few weeks, and to be frank Nie Mingjue wasn't sure how they were going to handle that with the media feeding frenzy that was going on. He'd already gotten more calls from anxious parents in the past week than he normally got in a year.

"That's definitely tricky," he admitted. "Especially if you want to put it in your old stomping grounds. I'm not sure there's even *space* in the Yunmeng district anymore; Wuhan has grown even more than Caiyi." He hesitated. But if it were him… "The lake is mostly gone now. It got cut off from the Yangtze… sixty-ish years ago."

Wei Wuxian blinked. "That must have been a mess," he said after a moment, looking nonplussed.

"Yeah. Between the loss of water and pollution from the city… what's left is in pretty bad shape," Nie Mingjue admitted. And damn, but he *got* that reaction, less shocked than *baffled*. By all accounts, the lake had been *huge*, and it would have dominated the landscape. It wasn't the sort of thing you'd expect to be *gone*.

Speaking of which… "Yiling would probably love to have you, but they probably don't have the resources. The town was high enough that they weren't forced to relocate when the dam was built, but…"

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened. "A dam? But the closest river would be…"

“The headwaters of the Yangtze. Yep.” Nie Mingjue smiled wryly. “The Three Gorges Dam was completed about fifteen years ago. It’s one of the biggest dams in the world.” He scratched his chin. “Which is the other reason Yiling isn’t the best place to set up shop. The government keeps damn close tabs on that thing, because if it breaks…”

Almost thirty *million* cubic meters of water unleashed in an instant. It would make the 1931 flood look paltry in comparison, and that thing had killed nearly four million people.

By Wei Wuxian’s grimace, he didn’t need hard numbers to picture the damage. “A dam like that would significantly disrupt the fengshui, anyway,” he noted. “Something that should definitely be watched, but it wouldn’t be a good space for training.”

Nie Mingjue had to grin. “Maybe that’s where the lake monster stories come from, then.” Especially when he considered all the archaeological sites that had been flooded by the project – it had been one of the serious controversies surrounding the dam. Heck, some people even claimed that the vengeful ghost of Hou Jing had been washed into the reservoir!

Huh. Now that he thought about it… maybe not the best place for a school for baby cultivators – too bad, the mountains up there had some *gorgeous* spots – but it probably wouldn’t be a bad idea for Wei Wuxian to check it out. Just in case there actually was something to all the urban legends.

…He was seriously considering security measures for dealing with ghosts and ghouls. What a world he lived in.

The sound of an electronic chirp had him drawing in a deep, bracing breath, this time for an entirely different reason. His guys knew he was in a meeting… which meant that they were calling because someone somewhere had done something *particularly* stupid.

He listened to Nie Zonghui’s report and fought the urge to bury his face in his hands.

Particularly? Try *tremendously* stupid!

“A group of tourists. Tried to scale the cliff. In broad daylight.” He had to break it down into little phrases, his brain refused to encompass the full stupidity enough to put it into a complete sentence.

“I’m afraid so.” Nie Zonghui’s voice was a mix of disgust, bemusement, and amusement at his boss’s reaction.

“The *sheer* cliff. With all the *danger, beware of rockfall, cliff face unstable* signs.”

“That’s correct.”

Nie Mingjue closed his eyes and sighed. “Please tell me we got them on video so we can prove that this was *their* idiocy.”

“Oh, they live-streamed the whole thing themselves,” Nie Zonghui said wryly. “I gather they were hoping for a gallant rescue on a flying sword.”

"…they don't even know he *can*, we never…" Nie Mingjue pinched the bridge of his nose. Deep breaths. "Right. Please *sit* on those idiots, I'm on my way." Shutting the radio off, he looked at the other two. "Sorry. I meant this to be longer, but…"

"You have duties," Lan Wangji agreed. Wei Wuxian just waved a hand, looking like he was about to explode from the effort of holding back his laughter.

Hmph. At least *someone* found this entertaining.

"*Bwa ha ha hah!*"

Lan Wangji fought the urge to huff. "It is not a laughing matter. They put themselves in danger," he said. Although if he were to be honest, it *was* funny. At least it sounded like no one had been seriously hurt.

He did *not* understand fans.

Leaning carelessly against Lan Wangji's shoulder, Wei Wuxian wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. "Yes it is!" he gasped. "Especially if that cliff is what I think it is!"

If the cliff was… oh. "The Gusu Lan wall of rules?" That would explain something that had puzzled him for some time – how such a massive monument could have vanished. He knew that the limestone face of the cliff was prone to erosion; without flight-capable cultivators to recarve the higher sections, it was likely that the monastery had eventually given up on maintaining it. Possibly it had even been a strategic decision to downplay the visibility of the temple during one of the periods when Buddhism was out of imperial favor.

But it was also possible that some of the original carvings remained, eroded to the point of near-invisibility. He would have to speak to his uncle about it; mapping and preserving any surviving carvings would be an excellent project for the archaeology classes.

He felt like he should be offended on his ancestors' behalf at Wei Wuxian's sheer amusement at the thought of overexcited young people attempting to scale that same cliff as an attention-seeking stunt… but the man was right that there was in fact a rather amusing irony to it.

Still chortling, Wei Wuxian nudged Lan Wangji with his shoulder before straightening. "You can add that to *your* research project!" he suggested cheerfully, clearly having guessed the direction of Lan Wangji's thoughts.

Still, the comment made him blink. Had they not… No, now that he thought about it, they'd never discussed how Lan Wangji himself had become involved in the project, had they?

"I am not a member of the project's research team," he admitted.

Wei Wuxian looked at him curiously. "You're not? I did wonder why you didn't have anything in that pile of proposals."

Lan Wangji couldn't help a mental twitch at the phrasing, even though he was fairly certain that Wei Wuxian wasn't actually aware of the more common use of the term *proposal* or the

mental images it brought to mind. He also couldn't help the flash of smug satisfaction at the thought that Wei Wuxian had been looking for something from him in the pile of research proposals. Or at least noticed the absence thereof.

As previously noted, he was resigned to his own ridiculousness by this point.

"I was originally included in the project only as a consultant," he explained. And deliberately did not mention his suspicions about why his uncle had included him, although from the way Wei Wuxian's eyes narrowed subtly, he'd caught something in the tone that betrayed the fact that there was more to the story. "I became more involved after you awakened because I was the only one familiar enough with the old language to communicate with you."

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. "I guessed that part," he noted, as they began walking back to the path to the Jingshi; they'd met with Nie Mingjue in one of the side buildings of the historic complex, so that Lan Wangji would not have to venture onto the main campus.

Ironic that for the time being, *he* had less freedom of movement than Wei Wuxian. People knew Lan Wangji's face, while Wei Wuxian still had some protection from the cognitive dissonance of no one *expecting* to see him wandering around dressed like an ordinary student.

Not to mention that of them all, *he* was the one with rather substantial experience in getting around unnoticed in places where he really shouldn't have been. Something that, apparently, he was *very* good at.

Wei Wuxian glanced at him as he walked. "So you weren't doing research then. What about now?" he pressed. "You've probably *done* more research than anyone – you certainly took more than enough notes!"

Lan Wangji could feel his ears heating, even though he *knew* Wei Wuxian was only teasing. "I… have not decided. It seems inappropriate to publish research on information I only gained because I had privileged access, and without your permission."

Which was one reason he was looking forward to bringing on someone more familiar with oral history and interviews. He had rigorously gone through his notes from his own classes, but he had always known that his interests lay in the distant past; he had been diligent in his classes on working with informants, but they had never been his focus. His notes had largely focused on how modern informant practices could be applied to written sources.

He kept his eyes resolutely forward, but he could hear the eyeroll in Wei Wuxian's wry huff. "You've done more work than anyone, you've earned it." Wei Wuxian skipped ahead a step so that he could duck forward and look up at Lan Wangji's face. "And publishing is important to being a scholar in this age, isn't it?"

Lan Wangji hesitated. "Perhaps we might co-author the publication," he suggested, thinking of the plans that Wen Qing had emailed to him from her discussion with Lan Qiren.

Which led to another thought. "You should consider publishing papers of your own," he suggested. He already knew that Wei Wuxian was voraciously tearing through the books that

Wen Yuan had provided, as well as the boys' textbooks. It would not be long before he was ready to tackle more advanced texts. And it was clear that the man was positioned to offer unique insights into a broad range of fields and topics – medicine, psychology, physics, even metaphysics.

Wei Wuxian hummed. "That would probably help, if I'm to found a sect, I suppose."

"It would help, but it would not be necessary," Lan Wangji clarified. "The mere knowledge that cultivation is possible alone will guarantee students."

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian shook his head slightly, before straightening to fall back so they were once more walking alongside each other. "That's actually… sort of the problem."

Lan Wangji blinked.

Wei Wuxian was oddly quiet for a moment, obviously choosing his words carefully. "Cultivating is *difficult*," he said at last. "It takes time. Energy. Effort. Focus. The way of the Jiang was to embed yourself in the flow of the world, but even we had places set aside for cultivators to go when they needed to be away from everything, to concentrate *only* on cultivating."

Lan Wangji nodded.

Wei Wuxian released a frustrated breath. "That effort, that need to separate sometimes… it made it easier for cultivators, the sects, to *feel* separate. Different. And all too easily, *different* becomes *better than*. And that…" He shook his head again. "That, I think, was the source of many of our problems." His lips quirked. "The fact that the sects were really built around *clans* didn't help, either. At least we don't have to deal with that!"

Ah. Yes, Lan Wangji could see how that would happen. Physical separation, the psychological effects of a cultivator's enhanced abilities… a growing sense of superiority was almost inevitable, especially if access to the training was controlled by a select group of families.

"Many schools of martial arts today teach their students the philosophy and ethics of their arts, not simply forms and techniques," he suggested.

Wei Wuxian chuckled wryly. "So did the sects! I don't think there was a single sect that was not founded on a noble *ideal*. But ideals don't always lead to action. It's too easy to turn them into excuses!" He shrugged. "Ethics and philosophy are important. But… if I *am* going to start a new sect, I'd rather that cultivators have *responsibilities*, too."

That made a great deal of sense, and it fit with the comments Wei Wuxian had made about the reluctance of the sects to address anything that did not materially benefit them. Clearly defined responsibilities would offer a good countermeasure for that tendency, setting a standard to which cultivators could be held accountable. Not perfect – wherever power existed, there would be those who used it carelessly or selfishly, and no system would ever be able to completely curtail the combined forces of greed and folly. But it would at least set some boundaries in place.

“You have thought on this before,” he observed.

Wei Wuxian hummed. “Maybe not this *exactly*,” he chuckled. “I was never interested in starting a sect! But, well. I’ve seen what happens when the powerful decide that they are not required to care.”

Ah.

“Traditionally, ghosts, yao, and the care of the dragon lines were nominally the responsibility of the sects, were they not?” he suggested, returning to the original subject rather than pushing further.

Wei Wuxian huffed. ”Yes, and that will definitely be part of it. But it’s hard to claim you’re responsible for dealing with something that people don’t believe exists!”

Ah. True. And another aspect to consider: clearly defined responsibilities would help as a check on selfish ambitions, but they would also help integrate the practice of cultivation into modern society, and justify its revival. With that in mind… “You should speak to Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan.”

Wei Wuxian blinked at him.

“Your ability to communicate with A’Qing provided them with valuable evidence. Being able to gather testimony from the victim of a murder would be invaluable to finding the murderer.”

“…Huh.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes darted to Wei Wuxian’s face, caught by the strange tone. Wei Wuxian’s mobile features were oddly still, but there was something complicated in the set of his eyes. “Wei Ying?”

Wei Wuxian blinked, then smiled wryly. “It’s a good thought!” he agreed. “Just… well. Jiang Cheng and I always avoided talking about that part of guidao. People tend to get very jumpy about the idea of skeletons in the closet talking!”

“Inquiry also elicits information from the dead,” Lan Wangji pointed out. “Is your method so different?”

“With Inquiry, they generally don’t come *looking* for you!” Wei Wuxian laughed. “And you have to ask the right questions.” He hummed thoughtfully. “Still, you have a point. Although it might not be quite as useful as you think. Dead people are still people, after all! They don’t always even *know* the truth, let alone tell it!”

“Which would be no different than a living witness,” Lan Wangji countered. “As I said, you should speak to the detectives; they will have a better idea of what would be helpful than I.” He hesitated. “I believe they would like to speak to you, regardless. It is thanks to you that they now know what happened to A’Qing. And that is another thing you can offer. Closure for those mourning.”

“Hm. That’s not always so welcome,” Wei Wuxian observed wryly, and shrugged. “But yes, that would be an interesting conversation!” He glanced back over his shoulder, in the direction of the stairs, and chuckled. “Although we may want to give things some time to calm down, first.”

That was an *eminently* reasonable suggestion, if there were people *climbing cliffs* in a bid for attention. He did not want to know *what* had possessed them to think *that* was anything like a good idea!

NOTES:

Sunzi is the pinyin spelling of Sun Tzu. I figured that if I was going with modern romanization, I might as well commit to it. As for the snark about “as per my last email,” I direct you to this post: https://vexwerewolf.tumblr.com/post/706195273738829824/i-was-trying-to-explain-the-art-of-war-to-my

Historical note: after the fall of the Han dynasty, you get a bunch of short-lived “dynasties” that culminated ultimately in the Jin Dynasty, which was forced to retreat south of the Yangtze; this is where the “Northern and Southern Dynasties” name for the era comes from. The northern region bounced through a lot of short-lived dynasties, largely of foreign origin; the southern was nominally stable and ruled by the exiles from the north, but functionally power tended to be in the hands of warlords and generals. It’s one of the reasons I tend to set MDZS in this general period, since it’s a time when – especially in the north – power tended to be localized to particular families and warlords, which fits the sects as they’re presented in canon very nicely! So in this fic, I’m also leaning on the prestige and status conflict in the south between the old noble families that had status and history, and the warlords who had military power but tended to crave prestige.

Wei Wuxian and the Disappointed Look is partly inspired by a fanart on Tumblr. It just sums up the dynamic *so well*… https://khattrann.tumblr.com/post/650237704077017088/dear-diary-today-my-cool-uncle-sighed-at-me-send

It’s not entirely clear when or why Suibian sealed. It *is* worth noting that Wei Wuxian *didn’t know* about it, hence not being aware that using Suibian would give his identity away in Jinlintai. Which to me means that no one else knew until after his death – or at least neither Jiang Cheng nor Lan Wangji knew, because I’d expect them to try using that as an argument to pressure Wei Wuxian to take Suibian up again. But logically it probably happened somewhere in the timeframe of the Xuanwu through to the core transfer, because much as I love the idea of sentient swords and Suibian sealing of its own volition, the only canon information we have is that it’s associated with cultivation level. So since in this AU Wei Wuxian never lost his core and therefore has been actively using Suibian, he’s aware that it’s sealed.

(Which, here’s a thought for you: given there’s no indication that *Bichen* is sealed, it’s possible to argue that Wei Wuxian at seventeen was at a higher cultivation level than Lan

Wangji at thirty-five-ish… No, I don't *actually* think that's meant to be how you read it, but it's an amusing thought!)

I came across a meta on Tumblr at one point that pointed out that some of the names that seem silly or whimsical in English (Suibian/Whatever and Ying/Infant particularly) actually do have philosophical significance in Buddhism… but unfortunately, I neglected to bookmark the post, and I haven't been able to relocate it! So while I drew on that, the specifics are based on vague memories at best; please don't quote me! With that said, the fact that Wei Wuxian is clearly accustomed to needing to explain his sword's name strongly implies to me that the spiritual reading is not the default… Which, I think, is a good reflection of Jiang Fengmian's relationship with Wei Wuxian: affectionate, but not much in the way of depth or thought to how he would be affected in the long term.

Credit for the idea of Lan Wangji simply smashing someone over the head with – as it were – a large blunt instrument goes to both the Dresden Files philosophy of using a wizard's staff, and a fanart I saw of Lan Wangji doing exactly that to Wen Chao. But just a reminder: nowhere in the novel does Wei Wuxian ever use his flute as a *melee weapon*; in fact, the one time he uses it in physical combat (to intercept an arrow shot at Jin Ling), the flute shatters. Nor is there any mention of simply summoning an instrument that floats in the air when you want to use it. So yes, carrying a *large, heavy, fragile* instrument onto a battlefield would definitely be *cumbersome*.

(Which is honestly why I incorporated the "use qi to reinforce an item's durability" thing, despite the lack of canon support. As someone who has a not too dissimilar instrument, the idea of toting a guqin around like that makes me cringe…)

"Lan Qiren is soft for grandnephews" is one of those things that as far as I can tell is purely fanon. But given that the guy canonically plays favorites, it's not an implausible fanon. More to the point, one of the things I'm attempting in this story is to develop a Lan Qiren who is true to canon – impatient, intolerant, inflexible and judgmental – but by his changed circumstances, is not an antagonist and even gets some redemption. So it works for my purposes!

And just because I know that the gunpowder conversation is going to bring this up… before anyone goes on about Wei Wuxian and blowing things up: I cannot actually recall any scene in the novel where he blows anything up, for science, for fun, or otherwise. I really have no idea where that comes from – unless maybe it's an outgrowth of his innovative aspect combined with the very *fanon* careless Wei Wuxian, impulsive Wei Wuxian, reckless Wei Wuxian, adrenaline junkie Wei Wuxian characterization. (Because, again, the novel both tells and shows that he's none of those things.) All the indications I see suggest that outside of *don't want to die* situations, he's fairly careful and methodical with his work.

I don't think novel canon ever actually states how big any of the sects are. We know that the Wen were originally the largest, and that's about it. However: given we're told that all the sects had gathered at Nightless City for the pledge and there were at most three thousand *total* (hence Wei Wuxian mocking his supposed kill count)… well, it's worth remembering that this would be the great sects *and* the smaller ones combined. So the four remaining great sects have to average less than eight hundred each. There's also Wen Ruohan's demand for

the heirs *and twenty disciples* from each sect for indoctrination; if we assume his aim is to take hostages *and* take a bite out of the fighting forces, then twenty has to be a noticeable percentage. (Although he's limited by how large a group his own forces at the indoctrination could handle.) Also, a lower average would explain how the Wen got so powerful, when cultivators are difficult to train, as well as explaining the implication that by the time of the Phoenix Mountain event, Yunmeng Jiang was strong enough to make the other sects nervous. So… my sense is that the great sects number maybe three to five hundred cultivators *max*, mid-size sects no more than fifty to a hundred, and plenty of tiny family sects and rogues. And honestly, I'm probably overestimating.

With the caveat that this is counting *full cultivators*; once you get to the bigger sects, you'll have children in training, non-combatants, probably support staff who aren't cultivators at all…

Regarding sect mottos, one of the interesting things to come out of reading fan translator comments is seeing how the pressure to recreate the pithiness of the original mottos in English flattens out a lot of nuance. For instance, I've seen plenty of fandom comments on how the Lan motto of "be righteous" emphasizes ethics far more than the Jiang "do the impossible"… except that the actual meanings are more "observe Right Conduct by obeying your elders" and "do the right thing even when it's impossible." This is definitely one of those places where the structural differences in Chinese and English pragmatics *really* can get you into trouble.

(Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics dealing with how language is *used*, and it's incredibly important to understanding where translation can fumble. For example, in English prose, you generally don't write out "hahaha," you write *he laughed* – because he's not actually saying it, he's just laughing. It's only written out in occasional cases to emphasize the sound, or to hint to a reader that the laughter is forced, nervous, or faked. But in, say, Japanese, writing "hahaha" in dialogue to indicate laughter is completely standard. Which means that if the translator chooses, as many do, to follow the original text and write out "hahaha" rather than replacing it with a dialogue tag indicating laughter, *it changes the implications*.

Given that Chinese *also* seems to follow the "write hahaha rather than *he laughed*" pattern, and Wei Wuxian laughs a lot, I have to wonder if that helps contribute to the tendency in English fanon to read Wei Wuxian as lacking in confidence.

Another example: in Chinese Lan Wangji is *eloquent*, because he knows how to encapsulate a thought into a single short phrase full of allusions. But in English, eloquence is usually characterized by using words *beautifully* – which tends to demand more words, not less, because beautiful language in English hinges on rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. I suspect this is part of where "Lan Wangji caveman speech" comes from – an attempt to recreate the succinct quality of his speech (because "doesn't talk" is such a strong part of his characterization), and in the process sacrificing his eloquence because we don't *think* of eloquence being terse.)

(Sidebar: No idea where the whole "speaks in third person, uses names rather than *I* or *you*" thing comes from, though. It's certainly not from the source material, because Chinese grammar doesn't do that! It honestly almost sounds like the "broken English" stereotypes

intended to mock immigrants as anything else, which is… disconcerting when you realize how embedded it is in the fandom…)

Chapter 20: Family

Chapter Summary

Things are coming together.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for homophobia, specifically someone being outed to a homophobic family with malicious intent and the consequences. I know that fandom generally defaults to that simply being a non-issue, which I have no problem with, and my attempts at research into current attitudes in China has yielded conflicting information. But given how prominent homophobia is in novel canon (not to mention the impact of censorship on the adaptations!), I couldn't bring myself to just omit it.

The sun was shining dappled green and gold through the leaves on the side of the road, the sky was a brilliant, translucent blue with a few fluffy white clouds here and there, the birds were singing, and he hated it. Couldn't there be thunder and lightning? Or at least a dull grey rain? It would fit this whole *mess* so much better!

The guy driving chuckled. "All right, I have to ask. What did the scenery ever do to you?"

"It *existed*!" Jin Ling snapped, knowing that he sounded exactly like the grumpy brat Lan Jingyi sometimes accused him of being and too busy seething to care.

Seriously. How could everyone be acting so *stupid*! He'd flat-out *told* them that this was all just a ploy so his grandfather would have an excuse to get his sticky ambitious fingers into the project so he could sell himself as being all heroic and concerned and dedicated and stuff, not that it wasn't *blatantly obvious* or anything.

And yet! Here he was sitting in a car that was pulling through the back gate of Cloud Recesses like he was supposed to be here. Seriously, why were people just going along with this?! It was *dumb*!

At least it was the back entrance. Jin Guangshan would be disappointed, they'd avoided giving the media a photo op.

The driver just chuckled. "You're certainly grouchy for someone getting an opportunity that a lot of people would happily kill for," he observed cheerfully.

“Because I’m not *stupid*!” Jin Ling snapped. “This isn’t about *me*, I’m just a means for my grandfather to get his foot in the door!”

“I know for a fact that it’s not just that,” the driver countered. “Wen Yuan was pushing pretty much from day one to get you in, you know.”

Jin Ling winced and glowered at the back of the seat in front of him. Because that was the worst part. He did know. Because Wen Yuan was that sort of person. And if it weren’t for the fact that Jin Ling’s grandfather was using Jin Ling as leverage to stick his nose in, this would be *so cool*. But now he couldn’t even be happy about it and it sucked!

“As for your grandfather…”

Jin Ling made a face and braced himself for the usual lecture about *gratitude* and *respect your elders* or, worse, the whole stupid *I’m sure that deep down he actually cares*.

The guy sighed. “Believe me. I hear you.”

Jin Ling couldn’t help it. He gaped at the man.

The car pulled into a parking spot and the driver turned it off, but he didn’t get out. Instead, he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, like he was thinking.

Then he said, “I don’t normally talk about this. It’s not worth the potential consequences. But you know the score when it comes to Jin Guangshan. So…” The guy turned to look at him. “I told you my name is Meng Yao.”

Jin Ling nodded. “Right,” he said quickly – he didn’t want the guy to think he’d *forgotten*. (He absolutely forgot. He’d been distracted, okay?)

There was a flicker of amusement in the guy’s eyes that made him think Meng Yao wasn’t the least bit fooled. But then it became a pained smile. “Well. I was *almost* Jin Yao.”

…huh?

He was doing a lot of staring today, Jin Ling thought absently in the back of his head. But seriously, how else was he supposed to react to something like that?!

“*How*?” he spluttered after a moment, and then immediately winced, because okay, he’d set himself up for that one.

But rather than the mocking “*Well, when two people like each other a lot*,” Meng Yao just smiled apologetically. “He had an affair with my mother. I’m pretty sure it was just a fling, but when she got pregnant, he encouraged her to keep me. I think it was supposed to be insurance; your grandmother had a risky pregnancy. But in the end… well, your father and I were born on the same day.”

But if they’d been born on the same day… ewww! He didn’t want to think about his grandfather having sex at *all*, let alone affairs! Ew! Brain bleach!

But that also meant… "You're my uncle?"

"Biologically, at least," Meng Yao admitted. "Legally… well, once your father was born, he didn't need a backup heir anymore. And my existence wouldn't have looked good, especially given his support for the One Child Policy." He shrugged. "He reached out to me, back when your father died. Talked about acknowledging me. But then he found out about you, and I suppose a cute impressionable grandson worked better for his purposes than a 'recently discovered' illegitimate son."

Jin Ling swallowed, fighting the urge to squirm. It wasn't like he was under any illusions about Jin Guangshan, his parents had been estranged from the guy for a reason, but hearing it put so… matter-of-factly… "…Sorry," he mumbled.

Meng Yao laughed a little. "It's all right. It's not like you had much say in any of it." He shrugged. "I don't normally talk about it. He has the power to make my life very difficult if he learns I've been discussing his indiscretions. But you're a good kid. I… well. I guess I just wanted you to know – I get it. As far as Jin Guangshan cares, flesh and blood don't matter, unless you're *useful* to him."

Jin Ling looked down at his shoes. Yeah, his head knew it wasn't his fault, but he still felt rotten, knowing someone else had gotten thrown aside because Jin Ling looked better for the press. But… it also felt good, in a weird way, to know it. Meng Yao was treating him like an *adult*, rather than pretending he didn't understand stuff just because he was still short a growth spurt or two.

Meng Yao paused. "Actually, you deserve to know that you have another uncle on campus. You even know him – your friend Mo Xuanyu."

Jin Ling's head jerked up. "What?! Wait, no, he doesn't *know* who…"

Meng Yao made a face. "He probably can't talk about it. I understand his mother ended up signing an agreement with some very nasty legal consequences for telling. I only know because… well, it's my job to stay on top of these things."

Ugh. Yeah, that made sense, and it was totally something his grandfather would do.

Except now his brain was insisting on doing the math, because Mo Xuanyu wasn't *that* much older than he was, and that meant—

Ew!

Meng Yao must have mistaken his shudder, because the guy hurried to add, "Don't worry, he's not in trouble. Although we have been keeping an eye on him, for his sake. I think your grandfather has been pressuring him since the big announcement."

"So why are you telling me all this?" Jin Ling demanded. And wished he didn't sound so *plaintive*, even to his own ears.

Meng Yao shrugged. “For one thing… I thought it might help for you to know that you’re not the only one Jin Guangshan is trying to use. And… well, if you want to talk about Jin Guangshan, I get it. And I’m on project security. You won’t have to censor anything if you talk to me.”

Jin Ling nodded jerkily, not trusting his voice. That would… yeah, that would be good.

Because the worst part of the whole thing was, he wasn’t sure he trusted *himself* not to blow it. Back when he’d first been retrieved from the system by Jin Guangshan, his grandfather had barely given him the time of day – too busy jetting around making sure he was seen in all the *important* places with the *important* people. He’d left Jin Ling alone, unless he needed to trot out his feel-good family reunion story.

(Or the time he’d messed with Jin Ling’s school records, because apparently he wasn’t smart enough, *special* enough!)

But this past year, and this summer especially, he’d been… weird. Still jetting around doing all his political see-and-be-seen stuff, yeah, but he’d also been spending a lot of time holed up in the back rooms of the mansion in Linyi, or running off to Wuhan for days at a time. A lot of the time he’d come back in a really bad mood, stomping around snapping at people – which was *really* weird, because Jin Guangshan didn’t *do* grouchy the way normal people did, he just smiled and spread rumors and ruined people’s lives behind their backs.

But sometimes, he’d actually come to wherever Jin Ling was hanging out, just to… talk to him. Not smarm, but normal stuff, like his schoolwork and his friends. Which, ugh, the whole thing had been *beyond* awkward, especially when it was *so* obvious the guy didn’t understand how schools worked today, but it had also been… kind of nice. Except for the part where Jin Ling *knew* it was all an angle for *something*, even if he didn’t know what yet.

Argh.

Meng Yao opened his door, but hesitated before getting out. “Oh. Can I ask that you not mention my relationship to Jin Guangshan? I try not to let it get out too much. As I said, he has ways to make my life difficult if I cause problems for him.”

Jin Ling started to nod as he unbuckled the seat belt, then hesitated. “Um.”

Meng Yao chuckled. “Don’t worry, it’s not a secret from the project; Lan Xichen knows my background,” he said, opening the door for Jin Ling to get out. “I just try to avoid being associated with him, if I can avoid it.”

Yeah, that made sense. Jin Ling kind of wished he could get away with that! “Okay, I won’t,” he agreed. “But…”

“Jin Ling! Where have you been, slowpoke?!”

Meng Yao looked past Jin Ling and grinned. “Ah. And there are your friends,” he said.

The next couple minutes were a chaotic mess of backslaps and talking over each other as they all tried to say a dozen different things at the same time. Jin Ling wasn't going to admit it, he had *some* dignity, but he was glad to see them in person again. Video calls just weren't the same.

Although if Lan Jingyi even *thought* about trying to noogie him again, he would not be held responsible for the consequences!

Lan Jingyi snickered as Jin Ling shoved him off, then blinked. "Sheesh. What did you *do*, buy out an entire luggage store?"

"Huh?" Puzzled, Jin Ling turned and realized that while they'd been roughhousing, Meng Yao had been unloading the trunk of the car.

Um. He'd always been of the opinion that if his relationship with his grandfather was purely transactional, then he might as well milk it for all it was worth. But that pile… looked way bigger than it had when he'd been packing in a huff. "I guess it is kind of a lot…" he admitted, trying to look anywhere but Wen Yuan's knowing expression.

Meng Yao laughed. "Need help carrying all that?"

Lan Jingyi slung the strap for one suitcase over his shoulder and picked up two more, one in each hand. "We got this!" he insisted breathlessly, staggering for a moment before he got his balance back.

"Thank you for offering, though," Wen Yuan said politely, as he began picking up bags as well.

Meng Yao chuckled and waved as he closed the trunk and got back into the car. Jin Ling hastily waved back as the guy drove away, still feeling weirdly off balance after that conversation, and then hurried to pick up the rest of the bags.

Once they had everything – which took some doing, maybe he really had overpacked – they started walking, Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi leading the way along the back paths of the campus. Which was unusual enough that it wasn't until they reached the stone-paved path skirting the edge of the woods screening the slope leading to the historic complex that Jin Ling finally managed to get his bearings.

"Are you staying at Professor Lan's house?" he asked, trying not to sound nervous.

"We all are," Wen Yuan explained. "It's a little cramped, but it makes security easier. And we've done it before, remember?"

Yeah, they'd all stayed over for a couple days once or twice. But…

"And I'm making *you* carry this thing up those stairs!" Lan Jingyi threatened, adjusting his grip on one of the bags for the twentieth time. "What did you even *pack*, a whole gaming rig or something?"

"…Um." Okay, he probably should have thought that one through a little more.

Lan Jingyi gaped at him for a minute, before his whole stupid face lit up. “Seriously?! *Sweet*!”

Wen Yuan chuckled.

“It is!” Lan Jingyi insisted. “Come on, you can’t tell me you don’t want to try Mario Kart with… um, you know who.”

Wen Yuan smiled beatifically. “You mean getting our butts kicked once he’s had five minutes to learn the controls?”

“Come on, it would at least take him ten to actually beat us…” Lan Jingyi hesitated. “No, okay, you’re right. Five minutes *max*. He’s kinda scary that way.” He snickered. “It’s still gonna be awesome.”

“And we still need to get it up the stairs,” Wen Yuan reminded him, grinning when Lan Jingyi groaned dramatically.

Jin Ling huffed. “Just leave a couple bags here, if it’s that bad,” he said, rolling his eyes. And *almost* made the mistake of starting up the steps himself before realizing that he probably ought to take his own advice and leaving one of the suitcases off to the side at the foot of the stairs. It wasn’t like anyone was going to walk away with them. Or more accurately, he didn’t particularly *care* if anyone did. The stuff he actually cared about didn’t go in some random suitcase, he kept it with him.

As they started up the stairs, he side-eyed Lan Jingyi. “But are you really serious?” he demanded. “You’re planning on playing *video games* with…”

“Not here,” Wen Yuan interrupted, uncharacteristically. Startled, Jin Ling turned to see Wen Yuan glancing back at the path behind them over his shoulder. When he realized Jin Ling was looking, Wen Yuan smiled at him, but it was weirdly tense in a way that didn’t fit the older boy at all.

Pursing his lips, Jin Ling finally shrugged and looked away. Honestly, the stairs weren’t exactly a great place to be talking, anyway.

Although he did feel smug about the fact that he was way less out of breath than Lan Jingyi. His grandfather’s mansion had a ridiculous number of stairs, too, and sometimes when he got twitchy he’d walk up and down them just *because*. So he was in good shape!

Granted, Lan Jingyi was also carrying the electronics. Still!

Once they got to the top, Wen Yuan let out what sounded like a sigh of relief, some of the tightness in his shoulders easing.

“*Now* can we talk?” Jin Ling huffed. Because he was *impatient*, he wasn’t *worried* or anything!

Wen Yuan started to bite his lip, then seemed to catch himself. “I’d rather wait until we’re not in public,” he admitted. “I don’t think we’ve had anybody come up this far who isn’t

supposed to be here, but… some people are *really* pushy. And the fans can be… kind of crazy."

"A bunch of them tried to jump Wen Yuan the other day!" Lan Jingyi snarled.

Jin Ling's eyes widened. "Are you serious?!" he spluttered. "How did they even know you were *you*?" The video that the project had released had blurred Wen Yuan's face to hide his identity, since he was a minor. And the public information on the project only listed him as an intern on the project, no names named and *definitely* no pictures!

"It was kind of my fault, I should have known better than to get that close to the front gates, especially after… well." Wen Yuan winced. "Someone apparently posted my information online. It got censored pretty quickly, but…"

"I still think it was that Jin Zixun," Lan Jingyi growled.

"We don't *know* that," Wen Yuan countered; apparently this was a running argument. "It's not like the information would have been hard to get. Everyone at school figured it out, after all. Any one of them could have posted it."

Jin Ling narrowed his eyes, studying Wen Yuan more closely. "You okay?"

Wen Yuan nodded. "Uncle Ning scared them off."

Jin Ling opened his mouth to call bullshit, then reconsidered. Yeah, Wen Ning was shy and timid. The guy could also bench press a small car, was ninja-level sneaky, and could move so fast you couldn't even see it; he was honestly kind of terrifying when he wanted to be. And it wasn't like kicking butts required him to *talk* to people.

Wen Yuan sighed. "But it was kind of scary," he admitted. "The students aren't so bad, a couple actually tried to help out… but, well, I tend not to go down onto the main campus if I can avoid it anymore."

Huh. Well, that explained the back route they'd taken. Jin Ling definitely sympathized. His adoption by his grandfather hadn't been this kind of madhouse, but Jin Guangshan had made a *production* of it. By the time everything was over he'd been ready to smash every camera and microphone in sight.

It did raise a question, though. "What are you going to do when school starts? There's only a couple weeks of break left."

Wen Yuan exhaled heavily, cheeks puffing out. "I wasn't kidding about maybe just homeschooling."

Jin Ling tried not to make a face. It was probably the smart thing to do; Wen Yuan definitely wouldn't have any trouble prepping for the exams on his own, and as someone who'd *done* the whole celebrity-in-school thing, Jin Ling could say with authority that it sucked.

It was just… Wen Yuan and his bunch were pretty much the only tolerable guys in his classes. And while he might *technically* be out of mandatory schooling, he doubted he could

pull off homeschooling. Or that his grandfather would let him.

“Honestly, my mom’s been talking about it, too,” Lan Jingyi admitted. “Apparently she’s gotten some pretty shady stuff from the school administration. Heck, even Zizhen’s dad’s decided to stay out of town for now!” He glanced at Jin Ling. “Has anyone been bugging you?”

Jin Ling snorted. “Are you kidding me?” he said dryly. “They don’t have to. I’m pretty sure my grandfather is milking it for all it’s worth.”

Lan Jingyi made a face. “He probably is. Are you *sure* there isn’t a vermin control we could sic on the guy?”

“That was rude, Jingyi,” Wen Yuan said mildly. “You owe the vermin an apology.”

“Oooh, point,” Lan Jingyi said, mock-repentantly. “To all vermin present, I hereby retract my previous comment and apologize profoundly for suggesting that you are in any way comparable to the human slime known as…”

Jin Ling unfortunately missed the rest, because he managed to inhale at exactly the wrong moment and ended up trying to cough and cackle at the same time.

Wen Yuan thumped him firmly on the back to help him get it under control. When he finally managed to look up again, Lan Jingyi had the smuggest smirk plastered over his face.
“You’re such an idiot,” Jin Ling huffed, rolling his eyes.

“Better than fussing over stupid people being stupid,” Lan Jingyi said, rolling his eyes right back. “Your grandfather isn’t *here*. And whatever he’s up to, I bet we can take it!”

Jin Ling wasn’t nearly so sure about that. His grandfather had gotten as powerful as he was for a reason, and it definitely wasn’t carelessness.

Except he wasn’t going to argue the point right now, because they’d just arrived at the Jingshi and Lan Wangji was standing there in the doorway waiting for them.

Jin Ling gulped and fought the urge to hide behind Wen Yuan. It wasn’t that he didn’t *like* Lan Wangji. He did! The guy was pretty cool, and it was kind of awesome that he’d basically low-key adopted Wen Yuan and put up with a bunch of teenagers crashing at his house now and then, but…

But he was seriously intimidating, okay?!

Lan Qiren, pssht, whatever, Jin Ling had met a dozen shouty critical old guys before. But Lan Wangji just had this *stare* that felt like he knew every stupid thing you’d ever done or even *thought* about doing and was Not Impressed.

And those cold pale eyes were looking straight at him!

“Jin Ling.” Lan Wangji inclined his head slightly. “Those are your things?”

“Um… Yes? Although we left some of it down by the stairs…” Jin Ling tried not to fidget.

Lan Wangji nodded. “Leave your bags out here.”

Oh no. He really *had* packed way too much, he’d been busy being mad and forgot that Lan Wangji’s house wasn’t that big, and the professor really didn’t like clutter—

Wen Yuan stepped forward slightly, drawing Lan Wangji’s attention. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

Lan Wangji shook his head slightly. “Xiao Xingchen has advised that we check everything brought here for recording devices and trackers.”

“What?!” Lan Jingyi exploded, incensed. “Jin Ling wouldn’t do that!”

Jin Ling rolled his eyes, feeling weirdly better. Lan Jingyi being a hotheaded *idiot* was familiar turf. “My grandfather *would* and you know it. And he’d have had plenty of time to sneak something into my stuff.” He unshouldered the strap of the bag he was carrying, lowering it to the ground. “I’m fine with that, sir,” he told Lan Wangji, who nodded gravely in acknowledgment.

“I thought Meng Yao was going to do that at the station?” Wen Yuan asked, looking suddenly unsure.

“He did,” Lan Wangji assured him. “But Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan are experts… and have access to new technology.”

Apparently that meant something to Wen Yuan, because he grinned even as Lan Jingyi huffed loudly, setting the bag with the gaming stuff gently onto the ground. “Man. Now we’re even doing bug sweeps? Seriously, we’re living an urban fantasy spy thriller here!”

Wen Yuan chuckled. “You do realize that innocent bystanders tend not to fare very well in those, right?”

“Innocent bystanders? Come on, we at *least* should count as plucky sidekicks.”

Jin Ling snorted. “Just try not to be the YA version. None of us need that headache.”

As Lan Jingyi squawked in protest, Wen Yuan looked at Lan Wangji again. “So… if Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan are here, does that mean Wei Wuxian has time to say hello?”

“They are speaking in the garden,” Lan Wangji said.

Jin Ling choked. “*What?!*”

“As, come on!” Lan Jingyi pouted at Wen Yuan. “You spoiled the surprise!”

“I sprang it on you because I knew that the look on your face was going to be *priceless*,” Wen Yuan said serenely. “Jin Ling deserves better.”

“Wha… I nearly had a heart attack, what do you mean *Jin Ling deserves better*…!”

Wen Yuan ignored Lan Jingyi’s flailing to look past him and meet Jin Ling’s eyes. “Want to go say hello?”

Normally, Jin Ling would be all in for a round of ragging on Lan Jingyi. As it was, he barely managed a tiny jerk of a nod, acutely aware that he probably looked like a rabbit staring into a tiger’s teeth as he desperately tried to get his brain to reboot. Because yeah, he’d sort of assumed he’d meet the guy at some point – but seriously? Right *now*? He’d just gotten here, he wasn’t *ready*!

Not that he was nervous or anything… okay, fine, yes, he was nervous! Sue him!

Because Wen Yuan tugged him forward through the main room of the Jingshi and into the garden and *Yiling Laozu* was sitting right there on the steps, hands dancing in the air as he talked to a couple of guys in basic suits, one white and one black.

Although… he didn’t really look like *Yiling Laozu*, exactly? It was definitely *him*, *no* modern guy had hair like that… but who thought of Yiling Laozu wearing a loose button shirt over a tank top, or baggy cargo pants?

Except that then Lan Jingyi was waving his arm enthusiastically, as if the guy was on the other side of a street rather than right there in the small garden. “Wei-laoshi!”

“Laoshi? Really?” Jin Ling asked. Mostly on mouth autopilot.

Only for Lan Jingyi to smirk at him. “Hey, I’m just showing proper respect for my *cultivation master*.”

Wen Yuan rolled his eyes and punched Lan Jingyi in the shoulder. “Learn to meditate before you run around saying that,” he said, with a hint of smirk, and then turned an apologetic look at Jin Ling. “But yeah, that’s… well, it’s a thing we’re doing. And you’re invited to try it, if you want.”

Erk?

Warm laughter interrupted them, accompanied by white teeth flashing in a knowing grin. “This is your friend Jin Ling, then?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Before any of them could respond, the guy in the black suit looked up, eyes sharp. “*Jin* Ling?” he asked pointedly. “As in Jin Guangshan’s grandson?”

“Don’t blame the boy for his relatives, Song Lan,” the guy in white said chidingly, before glancing past them to where Lan Wangji had walked up behind them. “Still. Are you sure it’s a good idea to bring him here?”

Finally! “No it’s *not*!” Jin Ling yelled, finally shaking off the mental blue-screen he’d been stuck in. “It’s a *terrible* idea but no one will listen when I tell them that!”

“And that is why,” Lan Wangji said.

Frustrated, Jin Ling glared at the man, momentarily forgetting to be intimidated. “What does that even *mean*?” he demanded.

Wei Wuxian laughed again, standing up – and, uh, wow, the guy was as tall as Lan Wangji. “It means that if your grandfather is going to be a problem anyway, we might as well choose the trap that we *know* is coming.”

Wow. Wen Yuan had implied that Wei Wuxian was pretty much fluent in modern Mandarin by now, but hearing it was different. Somehow, the fact that he still had a slight accent in the way he shaped the words just sold it even more, if only because it was a reminder that he *had* spoken a different language originally – which hadn’t even occurred to Jin Ling before it came up in the press conference Lan Qiren had held after the big reveal. Too many shows with actors speaking the modern language, maybe.

Although, something about what he’d said…

Jin Ling narrowed his eyes and looked sharply at his friends. “Have you shown him *Star Wars*?” he demanded.

Wen Yuan’s eyes widened. “No…? Honestly, I’m kind of scared to. He’d take one look at the lightsabers and then go off and *invent* one… um.”

Wei Wuxian grinned toothily at him. “Lightsabers? Tell me more.”

Lan Jingyi groaned. “Oh man, now you’ve gone and done it…”

The cultivator – *cultivator*, wow – smirked and pointed at them. “I *will* get an explanation,” he promised ominously. Then he turned to look at the two men he’d been talking to. “Regarding what we discussed earlier… Shall we meet at the lake this afternoon?”

The man in white hummed thoughtfully. “That would give us time to check the local precinct’s records; Caiyi isn’t really in our jurisdiction,” he said – so did that mean he was a cop or something? “The lake would make a good test run, though.”

The guy in black frowned. “Can you get there safely?”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “I used to sneak in and out of Cloud Recesses all the time! I think I can manage. I need to visit the lake again anyway, there’s something I want to check.”

Wait, what?

“I’ll explain later,” Wen Yuan whispered when Jin Ling shot a baffled look at him. “Seriously, some of the stuff we’ve learned is *wild*. Apparently the Lan used to be a *cultivation* clan!”

Whoa. *Cool*. But… “Who are those guys, anyway?” he asked, trying to get his brain to do *something* more than spin its wheels over the fact that Yiling, er, Wei Wuxian was *right there*.

“Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan. They’re detectives looking into the guys who tried to break in… and I’m not supposed to say more than that,” Wen Yuan admitted. “It involves… some

pretty scary stuff."

"He'll need to hear about some of it," Song Lan said, interrupting. "But we should do a bug sweep first. And it'll be a good opportunity to try this, too." He stood, picking up… a piece of paper. With swirling sigils painted in red ink.

Oh man. That's an actual talisman!

The detective turned it over and back in his hand. "You really think this will work?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian shrugged, rocking a hand back and forth. "Maybe," he said judiciously. "It *did* detect the cameras in the lab. I knew that I was being watched, even if I couldn't figure out how."

"Knowing that there's something there in the first place is half the battle," Xiao Xingchen said, smiling. "Although I do wish I understood *how* it works!"

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "That, I'm still working on," he admitted. "I think it may take a while to sort out how your electronics affect qi." He paused, looking at Jin Ling with a wry smile. "I'm glad to meet you, Jin Ling – Wen Yuan has told me a lot! And I will say hello properly, but…"

"But first you've got to check if my grandfather tried to pull something with my stuff. I get it," Jin Ling said, a little lightheaded.

The man laughed, reached over, and *ruffled his hair*! And then stepped away before Jin Ling could even react, following the detectives out to the front.

The minute they were out of sight, Jin Ling grabbed Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi by the arms and dragged them away from the door. "What's he even *doing* here?!" he hissed.

"Well…" Wen Yuan grinned sheepishly. "He kind of lives here."

"I'm serious!"

"So am I." Wen Yuan sighed. "Things got *really* crazy when he first woke up. He needed somewhere safe to stay that wasn't a *lab*, Professor Lan was the only person he could talk to… this was the best place for him." He shrugged. "He's sharing Professor Lan's room, now that you guys are here, too."

Jin Ling blinked. "But… what about security and stuff?" He'd thought… well, actually, he hadn't even thought about *where* the not-dead Yiling Laozu would be living, but he'd just sort of had some vague assumption that it would be some sort of high-security area with alarms and surveillance cameras and at *least* a bodyguard or two.

Wen Yuan just smiled wryly. "Jin Ling. Who do you think *caught* the guys who tried to break in?"

…Right. *Cultivator*. Bodyguards would probably just slow him down. “That… makes sense. I guess.” Jin Ling blinked rapidly. It felt like *way* too much was happening all at once, and he was going to wake up and find out that he was still be on the high-speed train to Caiyi and he’d just dreamt the past… hour? Maybe?

Except that he wasn’t waking up. So…

“So… we’re actually living with him.” He hesitated. “Wow.”

“It’s *awesome*!” Lan Jingyi crowed. “Although, word of warning – don’t let him cook!”

Wen Yuan huffed. “There’s nothing wrong with his cooking!”

“Wen Yuan, *you* cried when you ate it, it was so spicy!”

“That’s how you know it’s *good*,” Wen Yuan insisted. “Seriously, you Suzhou people are just spice wimps.”

Um. What had he gotten himself into…?

“Are you sure it’s a good idea for the boys to stay in the same house as you?”

Wei Wuxian looked up from studying the map of the lake, blinking. “Ah?”

Xiao Xingchen smiled apologetically. “I don’t intend to criticize. But… the arrangement means that all the potential targets on the project are in one place. Is that really a good idea?”

“Possibly not!” Wei Wuxian agreed, unbothered. There was no such thing as a strategy with no flaws, after all. “But the boys aren’t targets *themselves*. Xue Yang and his friends wanted Wen Yuan because they wanted to use him to avoid fighting *me*. They won’t be any safer somewhere else, so why not keep them close to the person our friends don’t want to have to fight?”

“He has a point,” Song Lan said, attention mostly on the map. “Are there any other sites?”

Wei Wuxian hummed to himself, comparing the locations marked on the map to the knots of resentment beneath the water. “If there are others, they passed on without grudges,” he confirmed.

Xiao Xingchen looked at the map and sighed. “So many bodies. I know it’s unrealistic to not expect any, but… it’s still depressing.”

“On the other hand, it says something that there aren’t more,” Song Lan commented, folding up the map and sliding it back into a waterproof case before tucking it into his pocket.

Wei Wuxian had every intention of getting his hands on a case like that. One of the problems with talismans was that an unexpected dunking at the wrong moment could leave you with a soggy mass of useless paper. Qiankun spellwork could be modified to prevent water from

getting in, but that was *very* tricky to get right without making it impossible to reach into the bag. There was quite a bit of liquid in human flesh and blood, after all!

Not to mention that a qiankun bag modified that way was useless for carrying *drinking* water. And frankly, between that and dry talismans, Wei Wuxian thought that the water was more important.

Xiao Xingchen nodded as his partner picked up the handles of the oars to move them back towards the center of the lake again. The breeze on the water was a pleasant relief from the heat of the city proper, but the resulting waves tended to push them out of location. "This number of bodies… unfortunately, that *is* about the rate I would expect in a city the size of Caiyi. Which at least means there's probably not a major crime ring operating here."

"Wouldn't expect one, not given the location relative to Shanghai," Song Lan agreed, and grimaced. "Although that's not entirely a good thing."

"Because a local group would force Xue Yang's faction to act carefully, or work against them just because this is *their* turf." Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. "And because Xue Yang and his friends are *not* local, they have no reason to be careful about what damage they do."

Song Lan blinked, then smiled faintly, a subtle wry quirk of his lips. "I suppose turf wars between criminals is one of those things that never really changes at the core."

Wei Wuxian had to laugh at that. "Not really, no," he agreed.

Although, really, it wasn't all that different from the squabbling between the sects, either – jockeying for influence and prestige with only the desire not to lose face in front of or draw retribution from the other sects to check their ambitions… until and unless one sect became so powerful that the others were unwilling to actually confront them.

Technically that was why they'd created the Chief Cultivator position, to establish some kind of unifying authority to control the feuding, but given that the position itself had been a blatant power grab by the Jin in an effort to make up the face they'd lost with their lackluster participation in the Sunshot Campaign… well.

And while most sects kept their own territories under control, for fear of looking weak… well, look at what had happened in the areas Wen Ruohan had targeted. With no ties to a region, he'd had no qualms taking actions with long-term consequences – the waterborne abyss in Lake Biling, waking the Xuanwu of Slaughter…

Which was frankly *stupid* from a strategic perspective. If Wen Ruohan had genuinely intended to conquer and control those territories, then he had just been creating problems that *he* would have to clean up, eventually – and for minimal strategic gain. But then again, for all the man's ambitions, Wen Ruohan had been focused on the power and glory of building an empire; as far as Wei Wuxian could tell, he'd spared little thought for the demands of then maintaining what he conquered.

Then again, it wasn't all that different from how the sects had reacted to the flood in Qishan after the war. They'd effectively eliminated the main sect in that region, but no one claimed

responsibility for what was left behind. Shortsighted… but not exactly surprising, either.

“Can you tell how recent any of them are?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

Wei Wuxian shook his head. “Not without waking them up,” he admitted. “Some are stronger than others, but that’s usually more a matter of how they died, not when. If they were *very* recent, recent enough to be restless, I could tell. Beyond that…” He shrugged.

Song Lan nodded. “That in itself would be useful,” he noted. “If someone goes missing, checking the lake is a necessary step. Having a way to search for a recent body without having to dredge the whole thing would save a lot of time and manpower.”

“And just being able to bring up the ones you’ve found so far is probably going to solve a few cold cases,” Xiao Xingchen said, determinedly upbeat. “Although it will be interesting to see how getting witness statements from the deceased will go.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. Truth be told, he was rather curious about how they would handle that himself. Contrary to popular belief, the land hadn’t been *completely* lawless in his time, at least on the small scale! Great sects and nobility did more or less as they pleased, yes, but there was at least the *idea* that there should be guards and magistrates keeping order. They’d had a fascinating discussion earlier, going over the ways that lawkeepers had and hadn’t changed over the centuries. He was looking forward to seeing how the new investigative techniques worked – especially since they would likely be part of modern nighthunting, however that would work.

Although on *that* topic… “I admit, I’m used to the unhappy dead being more active in making their presence known!”

“You did mention dealing with fierce corpses and ghosts,” Xiao Xingchen said. “That’s… a very strange thought. Our jobs would probably look very different if those were common today.”

“Do you have any idea why they’re not common anymore?” Song Lan asked. “I admit, I’m not keen on the idea that they’ve been around all this time and somehow no one noticed.”

“*Ideas*, yes,” Wei Wuxian said wryly. “That’s why I wanted to visit the lake. There’s something I want to check.”

Because once he’d managed to properly map the dragon lines, it had become very obvious that his initial impression was right; there was something *odd* about them.

Most of the primary dragon lines were as he would have expected, but the *slant* to the energies that had pulled the I Ching rod to the side was ubiquitous. But the smaller lines…

It reminded him of an account he’d come across, going through the Jiang archives after the war. An earthquake had actually shifted the tilt of the land in a nearby region, several generations earlier. The tilt itself had been too subtle, too slight to detect – but it had changed the watercourses of the region. The main rivers themselves had stayed in place, too large and settled in their beds to be easily affected. But the tributaries, the smaller brooks and streams,

had been cast into chaos, cutting new courses or going dry entirely as the water found new outlets. And in the long term, that *had* changed the larger rivers, strengthening some and weakening others.

Although it was difficult to say what was the effect of the strange skewing of the qi flow and what was the result of fifteen hundred years of change. Because the land *had* changed. Areas that he had known as great forests were now clear-cut farmland. The great canals cut by the Sui to connect the northern and southern regions had also connected the qi of the separate great river basins, and with them their watersheds. There was a *dam* on the Yangtze, only twenty years old! Small wonder the dragon lines there were in utter chaos – the dam would have completely altered the fengshui of the region, and there hadn't been enough time for new lines to coalesce and settle into place. And given the fact that the Yangtze dominated the qi of the region, it wasn't hard at all to understand how that imbalance would have affected neighboring regions as well.

Which wasn't a comforting thought. Because no matter where on the dragon lines he'd searched, the strange slant in the qi invariably skewed towards that region. Towards the dam.

Towards Yunmeng?

He couldn't be certain; even with Lan Wangji's wonderfully big, detailed map, the dowsing technique was only so accurate. But it did rather look like that trip to Hubei that Lan Wangji had suggested might have to happen sooner rather than later, if he was going to solve this little puzzle!

And it *was* a puzzle. Among other things: the disruption of the dragon lines should have meant *more* restless dead, not less!

But thus far, the only dead he had encountered were ghosts, not fierce corpses. And small ghosts, at that. Even A'Qing, wonderfully willful and determined as she was, was only a minor ghost compared to some he had encountered. And the fanatic's ghost from the burning of Cloud Recesses drew strength from his own obsession, more than inherent power.

More to the point: A'Qing and the fanatic's ghost both had strong ties to *anchors* in the living world. Unusually strong. Which made him suspect that those lacking such anchors might have been drawn elsewhere.

Drawn… or *pulled*, perhaps. Possibly by whatever was skewing the dragon lines?

"The lake?" Song Lan's gaze sharpened. "Why here?"

Wei Wuxian couldn't help a moment of amusement. The response was so very similar to what Lan Wangji might say – and yet, the *purpose* was so different! Lan Wangji would be asking out of fascination, seeking to understand more of the world. Whereas Song Lan's query was pragmatic, seeking to understand the *methods* he was using.

So Wei Wuxian spared him the details, simply explaining, "Because this is where the dragon lines of the mountains meet the lowlands. It's a good place to study the natural qi flows!"

Because yes, the rockslide on the mountain had altered the local fengshui, but not that much! The qi flows within Cloud Recesses still moved within still their own sheltered bubble, secluded from the wider flows of energy.

And, significantly, the effect of that strange skewing seemed to be significantly reduced inside that protected area.

Which was interesting! If nothing else, it meant that the skewing wasn't the result of the qi of the land itself being warped. Instead, it seemed likely that the skewing was a sign of some sort of outside force acting on those energies.

Which, granted, was a *mildly* terrifying thought.

Unfortunately, it also meant that if he wanted to know more, he had to get outside that sheltered zone – hence the trip to the lake. He'd been wanting to come down here for a while, but he knew going alone would make Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue *twitchy*, and everyone else involved in the project was too busy and too easily recognized to accompany him.

He had to admit, it was a strange thought. Even at his most infamous, before, it had been almost embarrassingly easy to go unnoticed, if only because rumor exaggerated so much. Cameras taking accurate pictures and videos had definitely changed things there! Right now, he only had the mobility he did because the only images of him available were from the day he'd awakened out of the ice.

Which wouldn't last forever, so he might as well take advantage while it lasted!

So this excursion worked out very nicely for everyone. Xiao Xingchen and his partner got a demonstration of cultivation techniques that were potentially useful for their line of work, and he had an opportunity to investigate what was happening to the dragon lines.

"Is there anything we need to do?" Song Lan asked.

Wei Wuxian grinned as he settled into a relaxed half-lotus position on the hard seat of the boat – no need for a full lotus seat, not for something this simple. "If you can keep us close to the center, that will help! But this shouldn't take long."

Settling his breathing, he slipped easily into a light meditative trance. He'd had plenty of opportunity to observe the local fengshui closely while he'd been identifying bodies in the water for the detectives. All he needed now was to compare the patterns that *should* be present to what was actually happening.

And… yep, there it was! Subtle – but he could immediately perceive the twist in the qi flow around him, now that he knew what he was looking for. The primary lines weren't overly affected, but the smaller flows reminded him of the trees that grew on the high slopes of mountains, permanently bent by the wind to grow at an angle…

Hm. Now *that* was an interesting thought.

Opening his eyes, Wei Wuxian began fishing through his pockets. To be honest, he was still a bit ambivalent about the new designs and fashions. The snuggly soft undershirts that Lan Wangji had provided were very nice, but the overshirts felt very *flimsy*. And short. Awkwardly short. And the cut of many trousers today did *not* help! He kept expecting Madam Yu to rise up from the dead in rage at the sheer indecency! Not to mention that many of them made it hard to move around properly.

These light, baggy trousers, though, they worked very nicely… and they had *pockets*! So many pockets!

Really, pockets were the *best*. Even if getting the qiankun spellwork stitched into the thin fabric had been an absolute headache.

Also? *Zippers*. Zippers were *amazing*, because they meant that the mouth of the pocket could be much wider than its depth. Combine that with the spellwork, and he could carry *so much stuff*!

He crowed in satisfaction as he found the talisman he'd been after, then hesitated. "This might get a little bit flashy," he admitted. Not *too* much, there wasn't that much ambient yin qi, especially on a lazy summer afternoon, but…

Song Lan glanced at one of the other boats drifting across the lake. "Better keep it out of line of sight, if you can," he suggested.

Wei Wuxian huffed, but didn't complain, settling down on the bottom of the boat. The high sides and light breeze meant that it was still mostly dry anyway, and they would block anyone's view of the talisman when it activated.

Hopefully, at least. Although… "It's much busier now than it was last time," he observed. Where there'd been only a handful of small fishing and pleasure boats on the water when he'd come here with Lan Wangji, now he could see easily a dozen with a single glance!

Xiao Xingchen chuckled. "That's not surprising. Tourism in Caiyi has skyrocketed since the word got out about… well. You."

Wei Wuxian hesitated. "Was it really *that* big a thing?" he asked,

"Oh yes," Xiao Xingchen said, a wry sort of sympathy in his smile. "It's caused quite a sensation around the entire world."

Wei Wuxian sighed noisily, caught somewhere between exasperation and a less than pleasant sense of deja vu. Truth be told… yes, Nie Huaisang had explained the impact of his being alive on people, and Wei Wuxian did understand it; he could just imagine how the sects would have reacted if, oh, Baoshan Sanren had suddenly descended from her mountain to walk in their midst. But for the most part, he was trying not to think about it too much. It brought up unpleasant echoes of would-be disciples appearing in Yiling, and plotting sect leaders issuing demands only barely cloaked as invitations.

"Not interested in fame?" Song Lan asked dryly.

Wei Wuxian stole a gesture from Lan Jingyi and blew a disdainful raspberry. “Fame is highly overrated,” he declared. He’d seen far too many young fools charging into battle for fame and glory and renown who ended up very ignominiously *dead*. And whining about it!

Besides, he’d *had* his fame and he would have happily been rid of it. What sort of title was *Yiling Laozu*, anyway?! Who came up with that and could he sic some walking corpses on them?

Shaking his head ruefully, he held the yin-sensing talisman out, keeping it low in the boat, and activated it.

He didn’t normally bother with yin-sensing talismans; he’d cultivated his own senses enough that it wasn’t all that useful. But he’d messed around with them quite a bit in the early stages of developing his compass, and he’d discovered that sometimes it was rather handy to have a clear, simple, *visible* representation of the energy around him to look at.

Song Lan grunted in surprise when the end of the talisman ignited. A startled moment later, Xiao Xingchen leaned forward to look at the flame with open fascination. “I assume that this is intentional?” he asked, extending a hand towards the flame and then quickly pulling it back when the heat confirmed that the fire was real.

Wei Wuxian grinned. It was fun to have so many people *curious* about cultivation – not in awe, or at least not *just* in awe, but interested and asking intelligent questions. “It is. The talisman burns in the presence of yin qi. The more there is, the brighter it burns.”

Which… hm. The flame was larger than he would have expected from just ambient background energy. Not by much, but enough to be noticeable. More interesting, it was swaying slightly, much like a candle flame would in a gentle draft of air. Except that this was a spiritual flame, not merely physical, and the swaying had nothing to do with the light south breeze rippling the surface of the lake. Instead, it was leaning to the west.

Which meant it wasn’t just a matter of the dragon lines being skewed. Something was acting across the entire land, pushing or pulling *all* energies towards the west… or, to be more accurate, *inwards*. Towards an unknown center. Somewhere in the rough vicinity of Yunmeng.

Bother.

Well, it did mean one thing for sure: if he really was going to found a cultivation sect – that was still such a strange thought! – then until he got this sorted out, he should probably do as the Lan had and find some sort of sheltered valley where the local fengshui shielded it from outside influence. Not ideal from a philosophical point of view, but odds were good that any influence this *pervasive* would interfere with the early stages of core formation in young disciples…

Oh. Well, that was a less than happy thought. After all, *something* had caused the sects to fall and cultivation to be lost to legends. Just how long had this strange effect been in place?

Not to mention… that was the direction towards Yunmeng and the dam, yes. But the Burial Mounds had also been in that area. He didn't *think* they were a likely culprit; even at their worst the Burial Mounds had never actively drawn anything in. But he would be remiss not to investigate.

Besides. He still wanted to see if that long-ago cleansing had held up.

Wei Wuxian huffed, then mentally shrugged. No point in worrying about it for the time being! Given how tricky it had been just to get down to Lake Biling, he suspected it would take a while before they could make any long-distance excursions, anyway.

Satisfied, he extinguished the talisman.

Xiao Xingchen's fingers twitched. "May I…?"

Chuckling, Wei Wuxian handed the remaining half over, brushing away the crumbled ashes. "It won't do anything," he assured the man, resettling himself back on the seat now that the flashy part was done. "A yin-sensing talisman can only be used once, since it burns itself."

"Can anyone use one?" Xiao Xingchen asked, running a finger along the charred edge.

Wei Wuxian hummed. "It would require *some* training, since the user has to activate it," he admitted. "But it would not require a golden core, no." He tilted his head. "What are you thinking about using it for?"

"You said that resentful energy isn't limited to corpses," Xiao Xingchen noted. "If we could use something like this to identify the location of a murder, or to narrow down where a crime took place…"

"How long do they last?" Song Lan asked.

Wei Wuxian tapped his cheek, thinking. "It depends," he admitted. "The strength of the flame is based on the energy it senses. If you try to use it in a place where resentful energy is particularly strong, you might end up with burned fingers!"

Xiao Xingchen laughed. "Duly noted! But what about regular levels of energy? This one is… half burned? And you used it… maybe five minutes? A little more?"

"Normally one talisman would last… fifteen minutes, about, if there isn't a strong source of energy," Wei Wuxian agreed. "That one burned faster – the yin qi here is stronger than I expected."

That got him two sharp looks. "Should we be concerned about that?" Song Lan asked.

Wei Wuxian shrugged, smiling ruefully. "Well. We *are* surrounded by a city – it makes sense that there would be more resentment around so many people!" Especially when those people were literally living on top of each other in those giant blocky apartment buildings! And the pollution of the lake also wouldn't help matters any.

Nor would the odd disturbance in the ambient qi; that was all too likely to stir up things that might normally not be an issue.

Huh. Something about that was niggling at the back of his mind, a half-formed thought that was more *impression* than anything coherent, just a vague sense of *this is familiar somehow*.

Deliberately, Wei Wuxian set the sensation aside; he knew from experience that trying to force it would only send it completely into hiding. Instead, returning to the conversation, he tilted his head towards the other boats on the water. "There is also *them*."

Xiao Xingchen sighed. "We're not going to like this, are we?" he asked with a rueful smile.

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly back. "Well. A sign that one is in the grip of resentful energy *is* obsession." Usually it was credited to heart demons, or qi deviations… but he'd noticed that mob mentality often had the same effect. Although in that case, he suspected that the resentful energy was less cause than outcome.

Song Lan grimaced. "I can believe that. Fandom can get pretty obsessive to begin with, and anyone who has actually come all the way out here? Odds are good that they tend towards the more extreme end of the spectrum." He drummed his fingers on the oars. "Have you seen what you needed to?"

Wei Wuxian considered what he'd learned, and nodded. He'd verified that the strange skewing of energy seemed to be affecting *everything*, not just the dragon lines. Which might explain the strange absence of gui and yao; that ambient effect might well pull energy away before it could coalesce in a coherent form, leaving it scattered across a wide area like the loess left behind after floodwaters receded. And anything that *did* manifest would likely respond as well! It didn't really explain the little ghosts lingering…

Then again, he'd only encountered the little ghosts *inside* Cloud Recesses, which was shielded from that wider effect by the local fengshui. Outside… well, there was young A'Qing, but she was exceptionally stubborn! Not to mention strongly anchored to both her murderer and the man she'd saved. But all the others were quiescent for the moment, sleeping under the water or in dark shadows. Also sheltered, in a way.

So! The good news was that something was *causing* the twisting in the dragon lines and the disruption of the qi flow. Solve that, and things should settle. Which, granted might be awkward in the short term, if it meant that the unhappy dead started making their opinions known again… but in the long term, he suspected it would mean far fewer lost souls left wandering.

The bad news was that whatever was at the *center* of the effect was likely a fully formed abyss by now. And that had the potential to get *very messy*.

As he'd been thinking, Song Lan had taken up the oars and was guiding the boat back toward the docks. "In that case, we should get back to the university," he said. "I don't know the spiritual side of things, but I *do* know how much damage a mob can do even when they're not angry. You should have seen the wreckage they made of Yi's downtown district the last time the home team won the championship."

Wei Wuxian made a face, but the man had a point. He'd seen it play out himself at the cultivation conference competitions… to say nothing of after the war.

Sighing, he pulled out his phone. "I'll let Professor Lan know we're on our way back," he said, firmly quieting a bit of disappointment. He'd hoped to have some time to explore – maybe find out if they still made Emperor's Smile!

Ah well. There will be other trips, I'm sure!

Lan Wangji flipped his phone over briefly, just enough to activate the screen so that he could quickly glance at the message notification. Then he set it face down on the table again.

"From Wei Wuxian, I presume," Lan Qiren said – surprisingly nonjudgemental, given the opinions he had expressed in the past about the intrusion of phones into conversations.

"Mn. They are coming back."

Lan Qiren frowned slightly. "This seems early. I would have expected them to spend the full day in Caiyi."

"I suspect they wish to minimize the risk of exposure," Lan Wangji said, deliberately picking up his tea again.

He was trying to contain the urge to fret. He could not, realistically, accompany Wei Wuxian everywhere he ever went. Now that Wei Wuxian was functionally fluent in modern Mandarin, it was only natural – in fact, it was *necessary* – that he begin exploring the modern world independently and on his own terms.

And realistically, Caiyi was actually a safer place for such exploration than the campus was, if only because no one would be actively looking for him in the city. The security video footage was not the best quality. So long as he was not in the company of a recognizable member of the project – such as Lan Wangji – he would be difficult to recognize.

Also, Lan Jingyi's enthusing over urban fantasy spy adventures had given Wei Wuxian the idea of developing a technique for blending into the background by harmonizing his own qi with the ambient energy around him – which the boys had gleefully dubbed the "These Are Not The Droids You're Looking For" technique. For a technique that the man was still developing, it was quite effective – although apparently he found it tricky to maintain.

(It was also, apparently, a very *advanced* technique, since it required excellent control over one's qi aura and a refined sensitivity to the ambient qi of one's surroundings. Which meant it was far beyond what Lan Wangji or Wen Yuan were capable of. Regrettably.)

Besides. The man wasn't actually on his own. Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan were both aware of the circumstances and security concerns, and they were also well versed in navigating potentially precarious situations. As was Wei Wuxian himself. For all his lighthearted demeanor, Wei Wuxian had survived a war. He was *not* a child unable to assess risks and make informed choices.

Still. Lan Wangji did not begrudge that with their afternoon free, Wen Yuan and his friends had taken the opportunity to go spend time with their friend Mo Xuanyu… but he'd found himself struggling to distract himself from his worries. His uncle's unexpected visit was a welcome distraction.

They drank their tea in silence – an old and familiar ritual in the family. Once his cup was drained, however, Lan Qiren set it down with a decisive *click*.

"First, I wish to inquire if the current living arrangements are acceptable to you," he said briskly.

Lan Wangji tilted his head slightly.

Lan Qiren pursed his lips. "I am aware that the initial decision for you to host Wei Wuxian in your private residence was partially a matter of necessity, given the problematic initial response by certain members of the project."

Lan Qiren's own response not least among those, Lan Wangji reflected, but didn't say aloud. This was perhaps the least begrudging acknowledgment of the early difficulties of the project that his uncle had ever given. Perhaps finding himself in the position of advocating on Wei Wuxian's behalf in the face of public opinion had given Lan Qiren a new perspective on that first week.

Or perhaps it was simply that he found himself unable to defend many of those early actions to a public audience.

"However. Regardless of the original reason for the arrangement, the fact of the matter is that you are now housing four additional people in your home," Lan Qiren said. "I am aware that Nie Mingjue prefers this from a security perspective, but that is no reason to place an undue burden on you when alternatives are available."

"That is not necessary," Lan Wangji assured him firmly. "The boys have stayed at the Jingshi before. They are energetic, but well behaved. And Wei Wuxian is not a disruptive guest."

Not intentionally, at least. But while sharing a room with the man was just as harrowing as Lan Wangji had expected, his urges and desires were *his* to deal with. They were not Wei Wuxian's burden to bear, nor were they his responsibility.

Lan Qiren looked deeply skeptical – doubtless recalling Lan Wangji's past difficulties with roommates as a student. Most of which, Lan Wangji thought, had stemmed from his younger self's deeply rooted but unconscious, and therefore unexamined, conviction that anyone who did not adhere to his own strict standards in all things was somehow lacking – in discipline, moral character, proper education, *something*. He was glad that he had not met Wei Wuxian at that age; the man's refusal to conform to any sort of set expectations would have infuriated him, without the maturity to understand that it was his own limited perspective to blame.

Although Lan Wangji refused to take responsibility for the clash with the neighbor who had insisted on playing heavy metal at high volume with the bass turned up at *midnight*.

“If you are sure,” Lan Qiren said, openly dubious. “I am… aware that you initially were not interested in being deeply involved in the project.”

Which was, Lan Wangji reflected, the closest Lan Qiren would probably ever come to admitting that he had included Lan Wangji more to show his disdain for Lan Wangji’s field of study than anything else. Ironic, how thoroughly those original expectations had been overturned.

“We are collaborating on a research project of sorts,” he offered, not wanting to drag that old argument out again.

As he expected, Lan Qiren’s interest immediately sharpened. “You did mention something to that effect. But no specifics.”

Lan Wangji inclined his head slightly. “It was a private project at first,” he admitted. “Wei Wuxian was curious to know what happened after he was lost in the ice. I thought it might help him to adjust, if he had some closure as to the fates of the people he once knew.”

Lan Qiren nodded gravely. For all his railing against *sentimentality*, Lan Wangji’s uncle took family seriously. “Were you able to find anything?”

“We found *absence*,” Lan Wangji said. “There is no recognizable mention of the cultivation clans and their sects in any known historical record. Nor is there mention of significant events that Wei Wuxian himself was a part of.” He *still* had yet to find any mention of the Sunshot Campaign in the histories, when it should have been the stuff of songs and legends.

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, clearly displeased – but oddly unsurprised. Then again, he had lived through the intentional rewriting of history more than once in his life.

And indeed, his next question was, “Do you believe the omission to be deliberate?”

“I cannot see how it would be accidental,” Lan Wangji admitted. Exaggeration, a simplification of the narrative as the deeds of multiple individuals – even across generations – were accredited to a small handful of heroes and villains, the transposition of certain events to suitably dramatic locations… all of those, he might expect. Consider the folk hero that Wei Wuxian had been named for, in the ice: a legendary mystical guardian suitable to the future glory of the man who would go on to found the Sui and unite the empire under a single banner again. It was possible that there had been a real man at the heart of the legend once, but tracking that identity down was likely impossible – and, more to the point, meaningless, when it was the story itself that mattered, more than any truth or lack thereof in its origins. Stories *grew*. It was their nature.

But *erasure*? That didn’t generally happen by chance.

That we know of, he reminded himself firmly. *How much was forgotten, because it was never written? And if it were forgotten, how would we know it was missing?*

Lan Qiren huffed. “Perhaps there is something to Mo Xuanyu’s ridiculous theory, after all.”

Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow.

Lan Qiren waved a hand brusquely. “It seems that, prior to being reassigned as my executive assistant, he was pursuing a research project of his own when not occupied with the project. He claims he has found documents suggesting that the history of Hou Jing recorded in the historical annals was subject to significant retrospective changes.” He huffed. “A foolish project to pursue; even if correct, no one will publish such work, especially by a student!”

Unfortunately true. Lan Wangji was surprised the young man had even mentioned it to Lan Qiren; Mo Xuanyu had always struck him as a man acutely aware of the forces stacked against him. On the other hand, Mo Xuanyu had been helping Wen Yuan with much of the supplemental research for Lan Wangji during the quarantine. Now that he was aware of Wei Wuxian’s existence, the young man would have the context to infer how much established history was about to be cast into question – making this a unique moment for such a controversial claim. And, truly, it would hardly be surprising, in Lan Wangji’s opinion. He had just been thinking about how prominent figures tended to accrue stories, with the acts of many attributed to the most infamous, and Hou Jing had long been a favored villain in the histories—

Lan Wangji’s thoughts abruptly shifted.

Hou Jing – according to the traditional account in the histories, at least – had been an ambitious general from the northern regions… regions corresponding to the lands Wei Wuxian had known as Qishan. And he had invaded the southern regions through a mix of deceit and force, deposing the Liang dynasty and attempting to set himself up as a new emperor before being defeated in turn by the Liang border generals.

None of the details quite matched. But the narrative arc of the story, the geographic region, the *timeline*...

“I think I would like to hear more about Mo Xuanyu’s work,” he said.

Lan Qiren looked dubious, but simply waved a hand. “If you believe it would be relevant,” he said dismissively. “In the meantime, I have completed my review of the initial applications for the role of oral historian. I would like your thoughts on them.”

Moving his cup aside, Lan Qiren set a quite substantial binder onto the table.

Lan Wangji blinked once, before opting to move around the table to view the contents, rather than attempting to drag the binder itself around. He was familiar with his uncle’s preference for reading documents in hardcopy rather than digital format – he shared it, after all – but that was an impressive stack of paper.

“That is… a great many applications in so short a time,” Lan Wangji observed.

Lan Qiren snorted. “Be grateful that Doctor Wen and I have already vetted these. As has Nie Mingjue; there was a disturbing number of completely spurious or otherwise untrustworthy applications.” He scowled fiercely. “To say nothing of those that were purely unqualified.

Some of the applicants did not even speak Mandarin! Do they expect to interview the man in *English*?!"

Lan Wangji had to bite back a moment of amusement at that. Wei Wuxian would likely have enjoyed the challenge; he'd already picked up a little bit of English from looking over Wen Yuan's homework, but he was nowhere near actually speaking it – not even on the level of the broken and stilted Mandarin he'd picked up in his first week with the project.

Although. "I suspect many would gladly learn Mandarin, for the privilege," he observed, as he began leafing through the applications. Had Wei Wuxian ended up at a facility in another country entirely, Lan Wangji would certainly have been sorely tempted to learn whatever language was required to speak to the man.

There was, he noted, an interesting dichotomy in the applications. Which perhaps was unsurprising; oral histories by their nature focused on recent events, not those that had taken place over a thousand years ago. So the applications were a more or less even split of journalists, ethnographers and modern historians – granted, most of whom highlighted hobby interests in ancient history – and scholars of ancient history who focused on daily life in their research, or related subjects.

One of those did prompt a raised eyebrow on Lan Wangji's part – because he recognized the name from his own work. The man was one of the leading scholars working on the reconstruction of Middle Chinese. Granted, Lan Wangji was by now *acutely* aware of the difference between what scholars had reconstructed and the actual language that Wei Wuxian spoke…

But from an academic perspective, it probably *would* be a good idea to have a linguist on the team, if only to follow up on Lan Wangji's efforts. Probably more than one, in fact. Better still, many of the historical linguists also had at least some form of ethnographic training as well…

Lan Wangji flipped to the next cover letter, glanced at the first line, and stopped cold.

When I was seventeen, I woke from a three month coma and discovered that the world had left me behind.

The applicant went on to note the parallels between waking after a car accident, to the intensely disconcerting reverse culture shock she'd experienced returning to China after several years studying abroad, and tied those experiences to her journalistic work with diasporic and displaced populations…

I don't pretend to comprehend what waking after fifteen hundred years would be like. But I do understand the shape *of such experiences, and*...

"This one," he said firmly.

Lan Qiren glanced at the page and pursed his lips. "Luo Qingyang? A *journalist*?" he asked, the dubious tone clear. "It is true that she has experience, but she is one of the younger applicants and her academic credentials are… lacking."

And yet her application had made the first cut – and clearly had made enough of an impression that Lan Qiren recognized it as hers from a single glance too brief to read the name.

Lan Wangji inclined his head. "As this will likely be a team project, the matter of academic credentials and historical background can be addressed through other members of the research team. However, I believe she may be uniquely qualified for the role."

It wasn't just a matter of her personal experience – it was the fact that she had thought about it in the first place. The other applicants had emphasized the importance of the knowledge to be gained and how their expertise might apply; Luo Qingyang had instead focused on her ability to empathize with Wei Wuxian's experience.

Lan Qiren huffed. "Well. There is no harm in interviewing her, I suppose," he said, as Lan Wangji continued to skim through the remaining applications.

"I will review these in full later," Lan Wangji assured him, closing the binder and setting it aside. None leapt out at him as Luo Qingyang's had, but many of the other applicants had a surfeit of qualifications of their own, at least on paper. "I will send you a list of recommendations once I have had time to discuss them with Wei Wuxian."

"By the end of the week, if feasible," Lan Qiren said briskly. "I recognize that this is not much time to consider the options, but…"

Lan Wangji nodded. The relative lack of expertise in ethnographic and oral history work among the current project leadership meant that they needed to bring in experts before they could design the research plan for the second phase. The longer that took, however, the more vulnerable the project would be to interference.

He wished that Wei Wuxian's safety were not still so dependent on the project. But their attempts to arrange for Wei Wuxian's personhood to be recognized as legal fact were proceeding slowly. Apparently there was a minor political battle raging over the specifics of his citizenship… and, of course, political pressure to make the *granting* of said citizenship a public event.

All of which was simply political theater and grandstanding… but so long as it continued to drag out, Wei Wuxian's legal status remained in limbo. Undefined, and therefore unstable. Which made him *vulnerable*.

"On the matter of unique qualifications," Lan Qiren continued briskly, "there is another matter I would like Wei Wuxian to consult upon."

Getting up, he retrieved the package that he had left beside the door when he'd arrived – a long, blocky thing slightly more than a meter long and perhaps thirty centimeters wide and deep, wrapped firmly in cloth. Setting it on the table, he unwrapped the fabric to reveal a box of sturdy wood, easily recognizable as one of the special containers meant to hold heavier or more fragile artifacts for transport.

“Lan Xichen mentioned that Wei Wuxian identified the Suzhou Compass as a cultivation tool – one of his own design, even.” Lan Qiren stroked his beard. “In light of that, I would like his opinion on the provenance of this.”

Looking at the shape of the box again, Lan Wangji *knew* what was coming. Which didn’t stop his breath from catching when Lan Qiren opened the box to reveal…

“The Jade Sword,” he murmured.

Technically, only the hilt was actual jade. But the blade itself gleamed a lambent blue-white in the light – a color that had once led many to believe it was oxidized bronze, until closer examination revealed that it was actually steel, coated with some unknown finish to give it that haunting color… and, apparently, protecting it from rust, as the only sign of the sword’s great age was the tarnishing of the silver ornaments and the desiccated state of the leather grip. No one had ever been able to identify or explain the finish on the blade – which, of course, had resulted in accusations of fraud and forgery when it had been unearthed from the same cache as the Suzhou Compass. Accusations that cast a pall over any attempt to study the sword, although…

“Some years ago, you published a paper arguing that the unusual appearance of the sword may have been the result of the application of Daoist principles of metallurgy, and therefore may have had significance in the practice of cultivation,” Lan Qiren noted.

Lan Wangji hesitated, suddenly disconcerted. “That paper was published in the Journal of East Asian Folklore.”

Lan Qiren’s face looked as though he had just sampled the juice of an exceptionally sour lemon. “I read your publications,” he said stiffly. “All of them. And while I remain wholly unconvinced of the value of *that field* as scientific inquiry, I do recognize that your work is well researched and academically rigorous.”

Lan Wangji blinked, for once silent not by choice but because he was genuinely at a loss for words. His uncle had never made any secret of his disdain for Lan Wangji’s research interests. To learn that he had followed Lan Wangji’s work despite that…

“…You believe the Jade Sword may be a spiritual sword?” he asked, deliberately allowing the implications of Lan Qiren’s words to pass without comment.

As he suspected, Lan Qiren seemed to prefer the change of subject. “It strikes me as a worthwhile line of inquiry,” he said. “Given that it was found with the compass.” He huffed. “And we have already witnessed one case of impossible preservation, so it is not outside the realm of possibility for there to be others.”

Lan Wangji hesitated. That particular parallel had not occurred to him. He had fallen into the habit of thinking that Wei Wuxian’s stasis in the ice was due to the man’s cultivation…

But then again, Wei Wuxian had just recently explained that a cultivator’s spiritual cultivation included their sword. And for that matter… There was a story that when the university had attempted to send the sword away for metallurgical analysis, it had somehow

always ended up back at Cloud Recesses, rather than crossing the borders of Suzhou. He had always assumed that it was the usual pattern of fantastical stories being attached to unusual-seeming objects.

Now that he knew spiritual swords could bond with their wielders, and could be passed down through family lines… he had to wonder.

"When must we return it to the collections?" he asked. He could not imagine that Lan Qiren would tolerate an artifact being simply left in someone's house for long.

But the older man simply waved a hand. "It is listed as having been sent for conservation and expert analysis. Which is not inaccurate," he said dryly. "I suspect no one will be asking after it anytime soon, regardless."

Under normal circumstances… likely not, no. Although it might well be more possible now than previously, if others made similar connections.

"How has the university reacted to the revelations?" he asked. He knew that the student body had, for the most part, chosen to close ranks against the intrusive fans and press. The administration, on the other hand…

Lan Qiren harrumphed. "The *university*, at least, has proper respect for my time and expertise. The board of trustees, on the other hand, do not seem to grasp that they are utterly unqualified to speak on these matters, and I tire of their endless attempts at pointless meddling!"

That was a striking level of vehemence, even for Lan Qiren. "What do they want?" Lan Wangji asked warily.

Lan Qiren did not actually throw his hands in the air, but his seething was obvious. "They wish to make a presentation to the *United Nations*. When we have not yet even published our results!"

Well. In a way, they had. But to Lan Qiren, *publication* meant a paper in a peer-reviewed journal, and he would accept nothing else.

It did not surprise Lan Wangji that the board of trustees would be looking to capitalize on the fame of the project. The board was, by nature, a political entity, and the recent events had put Cloud Recesses on the international stage in a way that their small university would normally never dream of. It would arguably be negligent of them to *not* take advantage, even as the thought made his skin crawl. And…

"Given Nie Huaisang's suspicions regarding Jin Guangshan, it may be advisable," he admitted reluctantly.

He did not pretend to understand the intricacies of the political landscape, but he did know that Jin Guangshan was highly influential in the party. That was not a position one achieved through stupidity or carelessness. If Jin Guangshan was indeed acting so directly, then he

believed he could get away with it, at least within the auspices of the Party's influence. And he might well be *correct*.

Politics was a field of battle where Jin Guangshan held all the advantages over them. Nie Huaisang's media strategy had thus far been a fairly successful defense… but history had shown just how easily the media could be controlled by those in power. It might well turn out that they would *need* the clout that international politics could bring to bear.

Although Lan Wangji had no intention of allowing the board of trustees, or anyone else, to believe they could simply place Wei Wuxian on display for an audience like some sort of circus animal.

Granted, if they tried… knowing Wei Wuxian, he would make them regret every life choice that led them to that point. Probably by playing the role *gleefully*. The man had no particular interest in the spotlight, but he wasn't afraid of it, either… and he was a natural *troll*.

But he shouldn't *have* to go that far, and Lan Wangji intended to see to it that he wouldn't.

By the sour look on his uncle's face, Lan Qiren had also recognized the possible necessity of political outreach – or perhaps simply resigned himself to its inevitability. Before he could say anything, however, Lan Wangji's phone vibrated again… and then again, indicating an incoming call.

Alarmed, Lan Wangji grabbed it up, worried that something had gone wrong with Wei Wuxian's return to the university. But to his surprise, the caller ID identified the number as Wen Yuan's.

For a moment, he hesitated. Nie Huaisang had gotten everyone involved in the project added security on their phones, and in some cases new numbers entirely. But he'd also warned them that any security could be breached by a sufficiently determined hacker – and that people *would* attempt to spoof the caller ID to break into the system. And Wen Yuan almost *never* did direct calls…

But that also meant that if he was doing so now, the cause was urgent. Decision made, Lan Wangji swiped to accept the call. "Hello?"

"Professor Lan!" And that was Wen Yuan's voice, superficially level but the tension underneath obvious. "I'm sorry to bother you, but… there's a problem. I don't know if it's a *project* problem, but it's also… not *not* a project problem, so…"

"Wen Yuan. Breathe." Lan Wangji waited a moment to allow the boy to gather himself, then continued. "What is the problem?"

"Mo Xuanyu needs help."

A few minutes earlier…

Mo Xuanyu's face went white. "Meng Yao *knows*?"

Jin Ling winced, wondering if it would have been better to just keep his stupid mouth shut. “I mean. I don’t think he’s telling just *anybody*? He mentioned it to me because… you know. My grandfather *sucks*, and he thought it would help to know that there were people I could talk to who got that.”

Mo Xuanyu ran a hand through his hair, exhaling shakily. It was *weird* – Jin Ling had always thought that the guy looked like he belonged in a boy band or something, with that pretty face and elegant build. But now that Jin Ling *knew*, he could actually sort of see the resemblance. Which was *so wrong*. “Why didn’t he tell *me* that he knew?”

That… was a good question, actually. “Maybe he just told me because I’m a kid,” he said, making a face. “Or maybe he thought it would just worry you? He said something about you not being allowed to tell people.”

Mo Xuanyu snorted. “That’s one way to put it,” he grumbled. “The stuff the old guy got my family to sign was *draconian*.” He ran a hand through his hair again, leaving flyaway strands poking up at odd angles. “I still don’t get why he’d tell you.”

Jin Ling huffed. “Who am *I* gonna tell?” he grumbled.

Mo Xuanyu’s lips quirked. “Okay, point,” he said wryly, and then tilted his head to study Jin Ling with sharp, thoughtful eyes. “So, why bring it up?”

Jin Ling glanced over to where Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi were waiting by the picnic table, very carefully *not* listening in on his conversation with Mo Xuanyu. Or rather, Wen Yuan was deliberately not listening, and he was keeping Lan Jingyi from snooping.

He lowered his voice anyway. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his friends, he *did*... but this was personal. “I just… wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Mo Xuanyu blinked at him. “What are *you* apologizing for?”

Jin Ling winced, poking at the ground with his toe. They were in one of the meditation gardens in the back of the historic complex, and the paving stones were worn smooth in a way that made it really obvious that the stuff in his grandfather’s mansion was brand new, for all that it had been sandblasted or whatever to *look* old. “I just… I know I’ve whined about my grandfather… you know. A *lot*.”

To his surprise, Mo Xuanyu laughed – sharp, but not bitter at all. “Jin Ling, believe me, you haven’t said anything I didn’t agree with. Except I probably would have used a lot more curse words.”

Jin Ling hesitated. “Still…” Mo Xuanyu was… his uncle, sort of. Jin Guangshan was trash, yeah, but he was still Mo Xuanyu’s *dad*. Even if that still made Jin Ling want brain bleach.

Mo Xuanyu shrugged. “Honestly, I mostly felt sorry for you. I know how this goes. Jin Guangshan only cares about you if you’re *useful* – and once he’s used you up, he throws you away. I’ve been there.”

Jin Ling made a face. He didn't need people feeling *sorry* for him, he had a handle on it, it was *fine*… but, yeah, Mo Xuanyu's description of Jin Guangshan's MO sounded about right. "Meng Yao said something like that, too."

"Huh." Mo Xuanyu blinked. "I didn't know he'd actually run into the guy."

He didn't… oh. Right. Meng Yao had said something about not really wanting it getting around that *he* was related to Jin Guangshan, too. But… shouldn't Mo Xuanyu know, at least? But then again, Jin Ling *had* promised not to talk about it…

Mo Xuanyu hesitated for a moment, then huffed. "Well. Since we're on the subject, I might as well tell you. Your grandfather has been trying to reel me in for *something* ever since the big news came out."

Jin Ling swallowed. "Do you know what he wants?" Not that there was much he could do about it, but… it would help to at least have an idea of what his grandfather was plotting!

But Mo Xuanyu shook his head. "Don't know, and frankly, I don't care. I'm ignoring him. Like I said, I've been there before, I'm not going to let that guy get his hooks in me again."

That was… okay, it made sense. But… "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

Mo Xuanyu shrugged. "I told the director and Mister Nie about it, so they know what's up. Outside that… it's not like the stuff he made Mom's family sign. I haven't *agreed* to anything, so he can't go after me that way. So what's he going to do? My mom is dead, if he goes after the rest of the family he'll be doing me a favor – I'm not important enough for him to bother getting creative."

Jin Ling bit his lip, wondering if he should push. Because… well, normally he'd agree with Mo Xuanyu. His grandfather had so many stupid plots and schemes going, he wouldn't care if one or two fell through. But this past summer, he'd seemed so *angry* sometimes. He'd even threatened to break Jin Ling's legs once!

He hadn't told his friends about that. He knew what they'd say. But it wasn't like anything had actually *happened*.

Before he managed to decide if he should say something, Mo Xuanyu clapped him on the shoulder and headed over to where Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi were waiting, effectively ending the conversation—

And pointed at Wen Yuan. "Do *not* think I've forgiven you," he announced. "*Call me when you're done screaming*?! Seriously?"

Jin Ling really wished he could pull off that look of beatific innocence. Wen Yuan got away with *so much* stupid stuff with that! "I did warn you that it was big."

"*Big?*" Mo Xuanyu flung his hands in the air. "You told me you had a friend who wanted a *modern Yiling Laozu look*. You might have mentioned that the friend in question was the *actual* Yiling Laozu!"

Lan Jingyi snickered. “Come on, like you’d have believed him if he had?”

Mo Xuanyu raised a finger as if to argue, then hesitated. “Okay, so you have a point,” he admitted begrudgingly. “And yeah, I get that the project was keeping it a secret and everything – but you could at least have given me a *hint*!”

“Wei Wuxian.”

Startled, Jin Ling turned to look at Wen Yuan. His friend was meeting Mo Xuanyu’s confused look with an expression as serious as his voice had been.

“His name is Wei Wuxian,” he said, quiet and stubborn. “Not Yiling Laozu. That’s something *we* decided to call him.”

“…Huh.” Mo Xuanyu scratched his nose. “I guess I hadn’t thought about that… okay. I’ll try to remember that. Not that I expect to meet him anytime soon…”

“No, wait, you have to!” Lan Jingyi blurted. “We need you to do a gaydar check!”

Jin Ling blinked, then looked at Wen Yuan. “What the heck is he blathering about this time?”

Lan Jingyi waved his hands impatiently before Wen Yuan could answer. “We need him to tell us if Wei Wuxian is into Professor Lan!”

“…think I’m gonna need a bit more context than that,” Mo Xuanyu said slowly.

To Jin Ling’s surprise, Wen Yuan flushed, looking at the ground to avoid their eyes. “I think Professor Lan *likes* Wei Wuxian. A lot,” he admitted. “But… it’s *Professor Lan*. Even if he does, he’s not going to actually *try*. Because… right now, the way things are, it would be unethical. You know?”

Mo Xuanyu blinked. Opened his mouth. Closed it. “You think Professor Lan Wangji has the hots for Yiling… for Wei Wuxian?” He stared blankly into the distance. “That’s… um. *Wow*. I’m going to need a second to process that…”

Process? What was he…

Oh.

Jin Ling felt his face burning. “*Ewww!*”

“Jin Ling!” Wen Yuan said sharply.

“He’s thinking about *papapa*!” Jin Ling snapped back. “About people we *know*! Ick!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Mo Xuanyu’s face had gone all hard and closed-off, and suddenly wanted to kick himself. Of course Mo Xuanyu thought he was referring to the fact that they were talking about two guys. Which would hit pretty close to home.

Jin Ling actually didn't care about that. But he was *fourteen*! How did he end up in so many conversations about *sex*? *Do not want!*

To his relief, Mo Xuanyu's expression almost immediately softened to amusement. "Papapa?" he echoed, not even hiding the laughter.

Jin Ling made a face. "Ouyang Zizhen's self-censorship is dumb." And he'd picked it up, darn it.

Lan Jingyi snickered. "No, you're just a baby who doesn't want to think about adults getting down and dirt… ow!"

Ignoring Lan Jingyi's hopping and muttering about his stomped toe, Wen Yuan shot all of them a quelling glare he'd probably learned from his aunt. "*Guys*. Can we be serious for a minute here?" Turning to Mo Xuanyu, he said, "It's not… I don't want to pry or anything! It's just that Wei Wuxian can be really hard to read sometimes. He's just… always kind of bouncy and friendly and really tactile and I can't tell if that's him *flirting* or if he's just like that with most people, because he hasn't *met* a lot of people yet." He hesitated. "Which… that's kind of the other reason. You're the same age he is. And… it would be kind of nice for him to meet people he can just hang out with sometimes, without it being a whole *thing*."

Mo Xuanyu stared at him for a minute, before he rubbed his face. "Oh man. If *that guy* flirted with me, I think I'd die. Or maybe just ascend." He shook his head, then pulled out his phone. "Let me check my schedule. You would not *believe* how crazy it is being Director Lan's assistant right now."

"You'd be surprised," Lan Jingyi huffed. "Some of the stuff we're getting is pretty crazy… too…?"

Lan Jingyi's words trailed off. Mo Xuanyu wasn't listening. He was staring at his phone, face gone utterly white.

Jin Ling swallowed around a lump in his throat. Suddenly he had a really, *really* bad feeling.

"What's wrong?" Wen Yuan asked.

"I got a message from the dean of the university." Jin Ling half-expected Mo Xuanyu's voice to be shaking, but it wasn't. He mostly sounded numb. "My aunt refused to release my tuition payment."

"Wait, *what*?" Jin Ling blurted. "That's *your* money, your mom left it to you, she doesn't get a say!"

Mo Xuanyu's fingers were flying on his screen. "She… Somehow she managed to get registered as the owner of my account. Some sort of legacy thing from when she was my legal guardian." He made a frustrated sound. "It's not that she hasn't pulled stuff like this before, but freezing *everything*? That's *stupid*, why would she…"

He stopped short. "Oh."

“What is it?” Wen Yuan asked, eyes wide with worry. Jin Ling didn’t blame him. That didn’t sound like a good *oh*.

“Apparently I’ve been disowned,” Mo Xuanyu said flatly. “Someone told my aunt that I’m gay. I guess that was the excuse she was looking for.”

Jin Ling gritted his teeth, worry morphing into seething fury. Because it wasn’t hard at all to figure out what was going on. “Guess my grandfather decided to get creative after all.”

Mo Xuanyu lowered his phone slowly. His hand was starting to shake. “This is… really bad,” he said, and Jin Ling could *hear* the cursing he was biting back in that pause. “I lose my scholarship if I can’t make the tuition payment. And… even if I get that, there’s no way the university will keep me on the project, not with my aunt screaming about me from the rooftops, and she *will*—”

“We’re *not* letting that happen,” Jin Ling snapped.

“No, we aren’t.” Wen Yuan had already pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Director Lan and Professor Lan are meeting right now. I’m going to let them know what’s going on, and we’re going to find a way to fix this.”

OMAKE:

Jin Ling snorted. “Just try not to run around like some YA protagonist.”

The universe shudders from the cosmic irony…

Wei Wuxian working with modern detectives:

Detective: “Sir, we *really* appreciate the access to a whole new category of witnesses… but could you please get the murder victims to stop messing up the evidence of their own murders?”

Wei Wuxian: “To be fair, the getting up and shambling around usually happens *before* I get involved…”

NOTES:

(Technically speaking, this actually would have fit within AO3’s endnotes limit… but, eh, at this point I have my formatting worked out.)

pats Jin Ling on the head Sorry, kiddo. The Jin Zixuan foot-in-mouth genes run strong, even after fifteen hundred years.

Speaking of… CQLfeels' description of Jin Ling as acting like a YA protagonist in a non-YA story is *so* amusingly on point. I had to give him that line for the *sheer irony*.

(And yes, I know it's a little weird to acknowledge the One Child Policy in a story that, due to influence from canon, already has *three* established sibling pairs. But it is a real policy, and juxtaposing support for the policy against Jin Guangshan's Jin-Guangshan-ness fit so very well. So… handwave!)

The visual for the Jade Sword comes from this Tumblr post: https://aniseandspearmint.tumblr.com/post/692669624944345088/peashooter85-chinese-bronze-sword-with-turquoise, although obviously I'm playing fast and loose with just about everything about it. But I'm sure none of you need any hints about what it is for the purposes of this story!

A silly thought on aesthetics… modern AUs pretty much inevitably put Wei Wuxian in skin-tight clothes (probably because, let's be real, we're all here for mental eye candy). But at least if you go by donghua aesthetics, then Wei Wuxian's personal preference, away from his role in the Jiang, seems to be for loose baggy comfort clothes.

…I also offer you the mental image of modern!cultivator Wei Wuxian reaching into his qiankun pocket and pulling out a lure flag. Flagpole included.

(Seriously, where are the Mary Poppins jokes in this fandom?)

As I said earlier, I'm not a huge fan of the Yi City arc. A'Qing is a great character, but as noted previously I *hate* bad endings, and that one is foregone. But it was interesting, writing Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan here, to realize just how much we don't know about them. For one thing, outside of Villainous Friends *we never see them interact*. All we know about their relationship is from secondhand (if that) accounts, and how they react to what's happening to the other. And when it comes to Song Lan, we don't even really know anything about his personality or motives. One example: I've often seen him cast as the more pragmatic one. But if you think about it, he goes along with expecting the Jin to deal with Xue Yang, the ideal of a non-bloodline sect, etc. I get the impression he's at least as much an idealist as Xiao Xingchen.

That said, since I made them detectives in this story, they *will* be a bit more pragmatic!

The yin-sensing talisman is an actual canonical one from the first Mount Dafan chapter in the novel. Which is kind of interesting, because given what we know of Wei Wuxian's abilities, you'd think he wouldn't need something like that. But it's an interesting concept… and while there's no claim anywhere that it's another of his inventions, it isn't hard to imagine that it either helped inspire his compass, or it was an early step in developing it!

For the record, Lan Qiren admitting that he reads all of Lan Wangji's publications, including the ones in a field he abhors? That's serious academic-style familial commitment.

One of the interesting things about writing Lan Qiren in this fic is that he's redeemable in a way that I *cannot* do in any sort of canon-adjacent setting. Because canon Lan Qiren is not a good person. I wouldn't even say he's *trying* to be good or do the right thing, because *trying* requires the self-awareness to put effort in. Heck, the guy isn't even a good teacher! (As I stated earlier, I've always been under the impression that the line about how Lan Qiren is *said to be* a great teacher is the author being her most blatant about the unreliability of reputation, given that it's almost immediately followed by a demonstration of the fact that the guy is anything but.) But take the guy out of the sect class structure and putting him in a context where "because I said" isn't as acceptable, in a context (scientific research) where questioning accepted wisdom is more accepted, and he has more potential.

Chapter 21: Regarding Partners

Chapter Summary

Mo Xuanyu's situation leads to some interesting conversations.

Chapter Notes

The culture of the sects described here really has very little to do with what we see in the novel; it's mostly the result of taking elements from fandom, swirling in the sort of jockeying for prestige and influence that seems intrinsic to the society, and going, "Hmmm, I wonder how that might work in the society of the sects as we know them."

Also, fair warning: the chapter itself is relatively short by my standards, but there are a couple distinctly long metas in the endnotes. They're not *actually* longer than the chapter itself… I think.

That had been a very *crowded* dinner, Wei Wuxian reflected, as he helped Lan Wangji clear away the dishes – as much for the excuse to get up and move for a bit as out of any desire to be helpful, to be honest. The table had clearly never been intended to seat five people, and adding Lan Qiren to the mix just made everything even more crowded. Not to mention adding his *scowl*, which had practically claimed a seventh place for itself at the table!

But it wasn't just Lan Qiren's grumpiness that had the air in the Jingshi buzzing with restless energy, Wei Wuxian allowed, eyeing the boys. Now that the taut silence of dinner was over, they'd clustered together in a corner, heads close as they whispered intently to each other.

That was definitely *not* the look of rambunctious juniors plotting trouble. Wen Yuan was maintaining a good appearance of outward calm, but his lips were pressed into a grim line and his eyes had gone flinty. Lan Jingyi was seething, his face flushed red with frustrated fury. And Jin Ling…

Wei Wuxian was worried about that one. The boy he'd met was a tangled knot of care and worry all wrapped up in a prickly coat of pure *tetchy* – and oh, but he understood why Wen Yuan hadn't been able to find any better way to describe his friend! But now… Well. The worry was certainly still there, as were the prickles, but most of all was an air of stomach-churning *guilt*.

Definitely worrisome.

Dishes tidied and leftovers stowed away for later, Wei Wuxian caught Lan Wangji's eye and tilted his head towards the huddle of distress on the other side of the room. "What happened?" he asked.

Lan Wangji's lips thinned in a look that would probably be towering fury on anyone who lacked the man's incredible control. Ah, so this wasn't simply a matter of youthful woes, then. Even more ominous. "A friend of theirs has been peripherally involved in the project. Apparently certain political leaders were attempting to pressure him into providing inside information. He refused."

Ah. "I assume they didn't take that well." He knew from plentiful experience that the more power someone had, the poorer their reaction to their desires being thwarted.

Lan Wangji sipped deliberately at his tea. Which was an odd choice of evening drink for someone who adhered to such a ridiculously *Lan* bedtime, but apparently someone had come up with a way to remove the medicinal element that promoted wakefulness, allowing it to be used for the taste alone. Which seemed very *odd* to Wei Wuxian, but then again he still found many things about the modern age odd.

And by the care with which Lan Wangji was handling the cup, if he didn't have *something* occupying his hands the man might well decide to continue his training in handling hands-on violence through an exercise in practical application. "We have no evidence. But someone apparently informed his family that he is…" He hesitated. "…someone who prefers the company of other men."

Ouch. That was a telling pause. "I take it that's still not the sort of thing one wants known in polite circles?" Wei Wuxian shook his head. "Is their friend safe?"

The relaxation was subtle – more a change in the air around Lan Wangji than anything physical. Apparently the topic of cutting sleeves was still a touchy one. "I do not think he is in physical danger, although we have arranged a new room for him as a precaution."

Wei Wuxian arched an eyebrow. That was suspiciously specific. "And *non*-physically?" he pressed.

"He has been disowned – declared no longer a member of his family," Lan Wangji admitted. "He has lost all access to his finances, which put his place at the university in jeopardy."

Oof. Wei Wuxian could relate. Jiang Cheng hadn't outright cast him out of the Jiang when he'd decided to cleanse the Burial Mounds and coincidentally help the Wen remnants in Yiling, but he'd made it very clear that Wei Wuxian would be on his own. He probably *would* have cast Wei Wuxian out, just to make a point, if he weren't acutely aware of all the other sects just waiting to offer Wei Wuxian a place with them.

"He will likely suffer lasting repercussions, as well," Lan Wangji added. "Homosexuality is no longer illegal, but it is… not widely accepted, either."

"What of your time?"

Blinking, Wei Wuxian turned to look at Lan Qiren, who had set aside the cup of tea he had been nursing to fix Wei Wuxian with a sharp stare.

“The records from the sixth century are unclear,” he said. “You asked if it was *still* not a thing to be spoken of – was it considered unacceptable in your time?”

“Hm!” Wei Wuxian tapped his cheek thoughtfully. “That’s a tricky one,” he admitted. “No matter what you *preferred*, oldest sons were supposed to give their parents heirs, of course – that was a matter of filial piety! But outside that…” He smiled wryly. “Well, it depended on who you were.”

There was a rustle as Lan Wangji quickly pulled out the recording device he’d taken to using for conversations like this, although he pointed paused and met Wei Wuxian’s eyes, waiting for him to nod his permission before turning it on. Then Lan Wangji set the device on the table before pulling out one of the notebooks he also kept at hand for when the conversation turned to a discussion of scholarly interest. Glancing to the side, Wei Wuxian was amused to see that the boys had broken their huddle to listen as well. Even Jin Ling perked up a bit, looking annoyed by his own interest.

Well, he couldn’t disappoint such an attentive audience!

Turning back to Lan Qiren, Wei Wuxian took a moment to order his thoughts. He was getting more accustomed to this, but it was still tricky, sometimes, to take the things he’d always just *known* and frame them in coherent words. “Among ordinary people, it was… Well. Sometimes disowning a child was all a family could do to keep them *safe*.” Standing out in a small, insular village generally wasn’t very good for your health. On multiple levels. “But if you were wealthy, or noble…” He shrugged. “It was considered… improper. But who would tell you no?”

Lan Qiren pursed his lips, but nodded, apparently unsurprised by the answer.

“And what of the cultivation sects?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Ah! That’s where things get complicated,” Wei Wuxian admitted, crossing his arms. “For the most part, the sects were like the nobles. So long as it didn’t interfere with your duties… it wasn’t *proper*, but mostly everyone looked the other way, especially if you were of high rank or people thought you were a particularly strong cultivator.”

“For the most part?” Lan Jingyi asked, surprisingly eager. “So were there exceptions?”

Hm. How to explain without the conversation descending into ridiculousness – or scorching the ears of boys who doubtless bragged among themselves about possible exploits but were in no way ready to think about *adults* doing such things. “Once your cultivation reaches a certain level, it is possible to cultivate together with a partner.”

Oh-ho-*ho*. Those were some remarkably red faces!

Wei Wuxian had to resist the urge to snicker. Because of *course* that bit of lore had managed to survive the centuries! After all, there was nothing like a good knowing eyebrow waggle to

keep an audience interested. He'd certainly heard enough salacious gossip on the topic when people who didn't realize there was a cultivator actually listening to them.

He smirked at them. "It didn't *have* to involve…" Oh. Well, this was amusing. He didn't actually know the modern word for sex! "...the thing you are thinking of that's turning you all so very *red*." He paused, grinning. "Although it doesn't have to *not* involve it, either!" he added mischievously, just to make them twitch.

"Wei Ying." Lan Wangji's voice was chiding, but Wei Wuxian could hear the amusement lurking underneath.

Chuckling, he shrugged. "The important part of cultivating with a partner is to find someone who… hm. Matches you, I suppose. But." He held up a finger. "Partners should be at about the same level of cultivation, or else the stronger partner doesn't get anything from it. And that's what makes it complicated."

Lan Qiren and the boys all looked puzzled, but Lan Wangji slowly nodded. "Marriage customs," he murmured. "The custom of patrilocal marriage – where women marry into their husband's family – was already an established tradition by then. I assume that this was also true of cultivation clans?"

Wei Wuxian nodded, grinning at him. Of course Lan Wangji would see it!

And, as he expected, Lan Wangji tilted his head slightly, following that line of thought to its logical conclusion. "Given that the cultivation clans were rivals as well as peers, there would be little incentive to strengthen a daughter's cultivation. Not when it was the husband's clan that would benefit."

"Some incentive," Wei Wuxian corrected, hoping he was using the new term correctly. "A woman with strong cultivation would have been considered a better choice for marriage. But… in general, yes."

That certainly had been the case for Jiang Yanli. True, she had never been all that interested in cultivating to begin with. But part of that lack of interest had been because there was no *reason* for her to be trained. Her engagement had been set, and so Madam Yu had considered training her an unnecessary expenditure of time and resources.

Privately, Wei Wuxian thought that had probably been a good thing for her, all told. Being the focus of Madam Yu's attentions certainly hadn't done Jiang Cheng any favors! But he'd never liked the way Jiang Yanli had simply… been pushed aside and dismissed, either.

The blasted peacock had *better* have treated her like the wonder she had been! He'd gotten better after the war – *marginally* – but Wei Wuxian didn't trust the man not to have slipped back into bad habits.

Lan Qiren stroked at his beard thoughtfully. "I see. If women were, on average, less trained than men… then the best potential partners for cultivation would be other men." He studied Wei Wuxian thoughtfully. "Were such partnerships considered… socially acceptable, then?"

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. “Sort of? It wasn’t exactly seen as *proper*... but so long as you were powerful enough, it was seen as a… necessary impropriety in the service of your cultivation.” He huffed, shrugging. “They were seen as… alliances, of a sort, but usually it was one of those things that no one actually *talked* about.”

“And what do *you* think of such unions?” Lan Qiren pressed intently. Surprisingly so. But then again, if a member of the project was being threatened because of his preferences, it *did* make sense that Lan Qiren would want to know Wei Wuxian’s own stance on the matter.

Lan Wangji scowled at his uncle and pointedly turned the recorder off and put it aside, clearly feeling that the conversation had crossed a line. Wei Wuxian flashed a quick grin at him and waved a hand before the man voiced his objections. Really, it was a reasonable question anyway! “I never really thought much about it,” he admitted. If anyone at Lotus Pier had had cutsleeve inclinations, they hadn’t been public about it. Which wasn’t surprising; Jiang Cheng had been openly scornful of such things. Wei Wuxian didn’t know if that stemmed from scorn for the very concept, or…

“So did anyone ever ask *you* to be their cultivation partner?”

“Jingyi!” Wen Yuan yelped, beet red again. Next to them, Jin Ling was at least as red, and very pointedly staring at the nearest wall as he pretended he had *no* idea who these people were, really.

The boy threw his hands in the air. “What? It’s a perfectly reasonable question to ask!”

Wei Wuxian had to laugh. Really, these boys – how were they so cute? “Well…” he said slowly, deliberately dragging it out. “As it happens… there were a few.” Mostly in the form of marriage alliance offers, but he vividly remembered the dumbfounded look on Jiang Cheng’s face, when the first letter arrived proposing a similar arrangement with a *man*. Granted, he’d probably looked much the same. Up until that moment, he hadn’t actually realized that could be a thing!

Lan Jingyi scowled and opened his mouth to ask another question, only to yelp instead – Wen Yuan had elbowed him in the side. “We’re getting off topic!” Wen Yuan said, giving his friend a sharp *stop talking!* sort of look. Then he turned to look hopefully at Wei Wuxian, pointedly ignoring Lan Jingyi’s glower. “So… you’d be okay with Mo Xuanyu staying on the project? Because, um, we were kind of hoping he could meet you.”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t you ask him that?” From the sound of it, this Mo Xuanyu was already dealing with quite a lot.

Lan Qiren lowered his cup with a decisive *click* that immediately quelled both boys, and even brought grumpy Jin Ling to attention. “Indeed they should,” he said sternly. “Wei Wuxian, thank you for your forbearance in answering such an… impertinent line of inquiry. Normally such things are not appropriate for casual conversation. But.”

Wei Wuxian inclined his head, amused. Inappropriate? Maybe, but that certainly had never stopped anyone from spreading salacious gossip over the banquet tables before! Compared to a cultivation conference, this had been positively tame. “But you have a responsibility to your

student. I understand." Granted, Lan Wangji insisted that the teacher-student relationship was rather different from that of master and disciple, but the responsibility of elders to juniors surely hadn't changed that much.

"Hm." Lan Qiren stroked his beard, looking strangely *satisfied*, of all things. Then he stood up. "Wangji, I will ask Mo Xuanyu to submit a summary of his proposed research thesis to you. If you are correct about its relevance, we may include him in the second phase of the project as a student assistant. In the meantime, I expect your recommendations regarding the other potential additions to the project by the end of the week. Children…" Lan Qiren frowned at the three boys. "I understand you are upset. However, the situation is being handled. Focus on your studies. Do not concern yourselves with the matter."

Oh dear. It seemed that Lan Qiren was unfamiliar with the temperament of teenagers. Biting down a rueful smile, Wei Wuxian began mentally counting down as the door closed behind the man.

He was impressed; Jin Ling held out long enough for Lan Qiren to be out of hearing range before the boy exploded.

"Don't concern ourselves? Even if we fix the whole money mess, getting outed like that can ruin someone's life! And it's *my* stupid grandfather who did it!"

"Do not make assumptions," Lan Wangji told him firmly. "We do not *know* that Jin Guangshan was involved."

Didn't know, but definitely strongly suspected, Wei Wuxian knew. Because Nie Mingjue had summarized what they knew about the threats circling the project, and Wei Wuxian had paid attention to what Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen had and *hadn't* said on the subject, and he had not missed how frequently that name came up… nor how very scrupulous everyone was to avoid making any actual *accusations* on the matter. Much as everyone had avoided actually *saying* that the Wens were probably responsible for the waterborne abyss in Lake Biling.

Oh yes. He'd been marking their comments *quite* closely.

"I'm more worried about his aunt right now," Wen Yuan admitted. "She *hates* Mo Xuanyu. Him getting outed like that… that's just her excuse. And his cousin is… kind of violent."

Lan Jingyi snorted. "That guy is a stupid thug. No way is he gonna make it past Nie Mingjue's guys to get at Mo Xuanyu!"

"If that trash even *tries*, I'm punching him in the face," Jin Ling said flatly.

Well. That certainly wouldn't do. "Jin Ling," Wei Wuxian said sternly.

To his amusement, Jin Ling started to bristle, only to deflate just as quickly. "I know, I know," he mumbled, looking at the floor. "I can't just go around hitting people even when they're *jerks*, it's irresponsible and violence doesn't solve anything…"

Wei Wuxian snorted. Whoever had taught the boy *that* had clearly never had to deal with a mass of enemies charging with swords in hand. “Sometimes violence is the only *available* solution,” he said dryly. “But also… Lan Zhan, you might not want to listen.”

Lan Wangji gave him a stone-faced stare. Amused, Wei Wuxian turned his attention back to Jin Ling. “Punching is not always a solution. On the other hand, you are at an important point in your life. If *you* punch someone for being a jerk, you can get away with just a scolding. You might as well use that power while you can; you don’t get to do that as an adult!”

And the fact was that there were always people who *would not* learn from anything less. Maybe this new age didn’t have gentry by that name, but it was clear that there were still plenty of people who ran around doing whatever they wanted, because wealth or power or prestige or influential relatives had left them with the idea that consequences were things that only happened to *other* people.

“*However*.” He held up a finger, transfixing the wide-eyed attention of all three boys. “As a *responsible* adult, I need to tell you: do not punch people in the face. Faces are harder than fists. Kick them in the knees or between the legs instead.”

Lan Jingyi was the first to break free of his slack-jawed gaping. “Uh… isn’t that. You know. Cheating?”

“*Cheating?*” Wei Wuxian huffed. “If you are *not* cheating in a fight, then you aren’t trying hard enough. I prefer not dying, personally.” Chuckling, he reached out and patted Jin Ling on the head. “Don’t worry about cheating and not cheating until you know how to fight properly in the first place – and we haven’t started that yet!”

Hm. Those were very round eyes. “But… you *will* teach us that?” Jin Ling asked.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian tapped him on the nose before the boy could duck away. “Later!” he said cheerfully. “*Tonight*, you should make sure your friend is all right. It’s been a long day!”

“Was that truly necessary?”

Silhouetted by the deepening twilight in the window behind him, Wei Wuxian blinked at Lan Wangji. “Was what necessary?” he asked.

Lan Wangji gave him a *look*. Things were different in Wei Wuxian’s time, yes… but he had lived in the modern era long enough to understand that *encouraging* a teenage boy to punch people was not acceptable.

But Wei Wuxian just chuckled. “Jin Ling is tetchy, but he is *almost* as serious as you are, Lan Zhan! He won’t misuse the ability. But he might need it.”

“There are better ways,” Lan Wangji said firmly.

“Better? Maybe.” Wei Wuxian sighed, eyes dropping to the comb as he resumed working it through his damp hair. After the visit to Caiyi, he’d been insistent on claiming an evening

shower; apparently he was not yet accustomed to the smell of modern cities. “But those ways aren’t always available. Sometimes, the only way to stop someone is to *make* them stop.” He grinned. “And Jin Ling is so *tiny*! Anyone who fights him is asking for it.”

Lan Wangji opened his mouth to object… then had to stop. Because he *did* believe that violence was never an acceptable response, but…

Well. He was learning self-defense for a reason.

Wei Wuxian was right. It was easy for Lan Wangji to say that there were always alternatives. He was a fully grown and educated man from a respected family – and he was also, to be blunt, physically intimidating enough that he did not have to worry about casual aggression from the people around him. But none of that would have stopped Xue Yang.

“I will need to think on that,” he admitted at last, after a long pause. It was… disconcerting. If asked, he would not have said he’d lived a sheltered existence… but then again, that was the nature of privilege, was it not? It went unnoticed by those who enjoyed it, because it was measured in terms of the things they never even needed to think about.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, but his smile was sympathetic. Then again, they’d already discussed Lan Wangji’s struggles with the concept of physical violence; he knew it was a fraught topic. “Probably wise, yes. I *am* aware that my standards are a little different!” He tilted his head, still teasing the last tangles out of his hair. “And their friend?” he asked. “You said that he wasn’t in immediate danger, but that’s not the same as safe.”

No, it wasn’t. “There will likely be lasting consequences for him,” Lan Wangji admitted. “Especially with his family speaking against him. But the consequences will not be insurmountable, I think. If Mo Xuanyu’s research can be incorporated into the second phase of the project, that will help to counteract the stigma of this incident.”

In an ironic way, it was amusing. Normally Lan Qiren would never consent to be associated with such a radical thesis… but he would never accept being *pressured* to reject it by an outside force. Lan Wangji had come by his own spiteful streak quite honestly.

Wei Wuxian glanced at him, openly curious. “And what research is that?” He assumed a look of mock horror. “Not more nonsense about hair, I hope!”

“No,” Lan Wangji said, amused. Although it did make sense that Wei Wuxian would be curious, after reviewing so many research proposals. “It seems that he discovered a discrepancy in the historical record regarding Hou Jing.”

“Hou Jing?” Wei Wuxian echoed curiously, and pouted when Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow. “Lan Zhaaan! If I tried to remember every person mentioned in that history book, my head would explode! You wouldn’t want *that*, would you?”

Lan Wangji huffed at the dramatics, but Wei Wuxian did have a point. They’d focused on the broad sweep of history for the most part, rather than particulars. And Wei Wuxian’s focus had, rightly, been more on learning the world as it was now. “Hou Jing is the general who

defected from the Wei dynasty to the Liang, and then deposed the Liang in an attempt to rule himself."

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian's face brightened. "That one! I remember thinking the account was odd. The sects didn't have much to do with the noble courts, but you would think we would have heard *something* about all that, even with it happening at the same time as the Sunshot Campaign…" He stiffened, eyes sharpening suddenly. "You said there was a… discrepancy?"

Ah. He'd made the connection as well. "Mo Xuanyu believes he has found evidence that Hou Jing never actually took control of the Liang as claimed. He may have conquered the capital, but he did not *rule*."

Wei Wuxian blinked, and then raised his eyebrows. "And from his siege on the capital to his death… three years. The same as from the fall of Lotus Pier to the end of the Sunshot Campaign." He smiled wryly. "Wasn't General Hou killed by a retainer? Even that fits!"

Lan Wangji slowly released the breath he'd been half-holding. After how hard they'd worked to find any hint of the cultivation sects in the old records, this almost felt… too easy.

Although. "That would suggest that the Sunshot Campaign was credited to the border generals who defeated Hou Jing." Lan Wangji frowned. "But there is no mention of any such alliance. In fact, histories agree that the rivalry between the generals is what allowed Hou Jing to succeed."

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Well, that's not wrong!" he said cheerfully, clearly amused. "The sects worked together in the campaign, but that didn't make them *friends*." He tapped his comb against his chin thoughtfully. "And it does make sense that the nobles would write as though the sects were merely their generals! Although the changed names… I wonder if something *like* those events were happening, and they just stuck them together?"

"It would not be unheard of," Lan Wangji agreed, hands still moving deliberately over the strings of his guqin. He should be preparing to sleep, it was very close to nine… but they hadn't had many opportunities to explore the question of what had become of the sects since the decision to go public and the subsequent upheaval of their routines. It was… pleasant, to once again be discussing historical theories and potential connections.

He would also be lying if he claimed that he didn't enjoy watching Wei Wuxian in a rare moment of quiet relaxation, as he again resumed combing out that long hair.

Although there was a thoughtful frown on his face as he did so. "Is there a problem with the theory?" Lan Wangji asked.

"Eh?" Wei Wuxian blinked at him. "Ah, no. It fits! Almost too well." He smiled crookedly. "Especially all the generals squabbling after it was over. The sects *definitely* did that!"

Lan Wangji waited.

Wei Wuxian huffed, smile fading as he pursed his lips. "It makes me wonder about what came after. Chen Baxian and his dynasty."

The general who had helped defeat Hou Jing, only to lead a coup against first his own commander and then the remnant of the restored Liang dynasty, whose sons had subsequently wiped out the other generals in a push to unify that ultimately left them vulnerable to being conquered in turn by Yang Jian. No few legends claimed that it was Hou Jing's own vengeful ghost that had driven them, ensuring the very generals who had brought him low would fall at each other's hands.

Given that the official histories claimed that Chen Baxian had seized power only a few short years after the defeat of Hou Jing… yes, he could see why that would trouble Wei Wuxian. "You think the fall of the cultivation sects could have happened that soon after the Sunshot Campaign?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "It would make sense, wouldn't it? We were recovering from the war, but things were still… tricky. We lost so many cultivators in the fighting, and most of the great sects had new leaders, or were rebuilding. We'd already lost a lot of knowledge." He grimaced. "All it would take was one sect deciding to seize the moment and simply… miscalculating."

That was a daunting thought. Especially given… assuming the general timeline was accurate, the Chen – or whoever the Chen were standing for in the official histories – would have made their move around the time that Wei Wuxian had been lost in the ice—

Apparently after an unexpected ambush. It was entirely possible that ambush had been the first strike of that campaign.

Lan Wangji frowned inwardly. Intellectually, he of course was aware that, had he not been frozen in ice, Wei Wuxian would have lived out his life – and died – centuries ago. Even so, it was… unsettling to realize just how close the man had come to being embroiled in the bloody conflicts that had ultimately brought about the end of an era – and possibly even the end of the cultivation sects themselves.

Although it did beg the question. "Why would they not have rebuilt? Even if the Chen attempted to suppress the sects, it seems strange that the art was lost so completely."

Wei Wuxian hummed. "I have a theory," he said.

Lan Wangji raised an eyebrow.

Wei Wuxian smiled. "You remember the twist in the dragon lines?"

Lan Wangji nodded. Watching Wei Wuxian map the oddity in the lines had been a strange experience. He had grown accustomed to Wei Wuxian doing things that seemed to violate the laws of physics, in part because the man was so matter-of-fact about it that it was easy to forget that what he was doing was technically impossible. The puzzlement he'd expressed over the stubbornly tilting I Ching rod had broken that illusion of normalcy, making it impossible to ignore the uncanny nature of what Lan Wangji was seeing.

"Did the trip to Lake Biling offer any new information?" he asked. He knew that Wei Wuxian had intended to investigate the phenomenon, but with the situation with Mo Xuanyu, there

had been no opportunity to discuss what he had found.

"Some," Wei Wuxian said. "Most importantly, it's not *just* the dragon lines. *All* qi is affected."

Interesting. And somewhat disturbing. "Do you know what might cause that?"

Wei Wuxian made a face. "On a smaller scale? I have a few ideas. But something big enough to affect the entire *country*?" He huffed, shaking his head. "Only that *something* is pulling or pushing energy inward… and that would affect a young cultivator's meridians, and the ability to gather qi."

Oh. And given how delicate a process core formation was… "The effect would make forming a core impossible."

Wei Wuxian tapped the comb against his cheek. "Mmm… not *impossible*, maybe, depending on the local fengshui. But it would be much more difficult. And given that cultivation is *already* difficult…"

Lan winced internally. He had already learned for himself how difficult the early stages of cultivation were, even with the one-on-one assistance of a skilled teacher. Add in the damage of war and the instability of the Sui…

Lost teachers. Lost knowledge. Lost *infrastructure*. Decades of political upheaval embroiling everyone in its path. Add to that a change in the natural environment that made an already difficult task exponentially more so… It was no wonder that cultivation had been lost. Even if it had survived for a time, simple attrition through discouragement would have struck its deathblow.

Still. The implications were… "You believe the effect to be that old?"

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "It would make sense, wouldn't it? I can't think of anything natural that would cause it – meaning someone *did* it, and that someone was probably a cultivator."

Ironic, if so. "Can it be undone?"

"Let's hope so!" Wei Wuxian grinned. "It's going to be hard enough founding a new sect by myself, I don't need something like this making things harder!" He shrugged. "But there's no way to know until we can track it down. And I don't think we'll have much chance to do that for a while."

Under the circumstances… all too true.

The quiet that followed was not uncomfortable, only a natural pause as both of them shifted their focus to their own thoughts. Except…

Except that now Lan Wangji's treacherous mind was replaying what Wei Wuxian had said: *it's going to be hard enough founding a sect by myself*.

They hadn't spent much time discussing the origins of the sects that Wei Wuxian had known, except for the Lan. But the sects had been clan-based. Presumably, many of them would have been founded by families.

Or partners? the part of him that had listened much too intently to the conversation earlier that evening suggested.

Which just led him back to another part of the conversation, no matter how much he tried to push the question aside. If only because he wasn't sure how to ask, or if it would be appropriate…

Finally, with a sigh, he stilled the strings of the guqin. There was no point in practicing when he was too distracted to pay attention to the movement of his qi. Better to call it an evening and attempt the qi projection exercise when rested.

In the silence, the sharp *crack* was startlingly clear.

"…ah…"

Startled, Lan Wangji looked up, and winced. The beautifully carved comb of lavender jade had snapped, right where the lotus formed the handle. By the look of it, the carver had worked a flaw in the jade into the lotus design, which had been part of the artistry of it… but time and use had weakened it.

Wei Wuxian was looking at the broken comb, his normally expressive face utterly blank. Which was unsettling; Lan Wangji knew the man's penchant for theatrics and deflection. That *stillness*... betrayed just how upset he was.

"It was significant to you," he observed quietly.

Wei Wuxian visibly shook himself before donning a smile again, although there was an edge of sadness to it. "It was a gift," he admitted.

Ah. Lan Wangji had wondered. The delicate comb was lovely, but quite different from the rest of Wei Wuxian's belongings. And the man had obviously taken great care with it, as if it were particularly precious.

"From… your wife?" he asked, carefully neutral. And fully aware that it was a ridiculous question, because if Wei Wuxian had been married then he would have said *something* to that effect by now, but he couldn't bring himself to ask if Wei Wuxian had been courting anyone.

To his (ridiculous!) relief, Wei Wuxian actually laughed at that, bright and amused. "Ah, no! I never had time for such things!" His smile softened. "From Jiang Yanli – my shijie. She gave it to me before she left to marry Jin Zixuan."

"Ah." He could *feel* his traitor ears burning. "I should not have assumed."

"Well! It wasn't a bad guess – it *is* a comb." Wei Wuxian shrugged. "She was my shijie, but… she called me her didi, once."

Lan Wangji blinked. That was… a very significant claim, given what he'd gathered about Wei Wuxian's odd status among the Jiang.

Wei Wuxian sighed, setting the broken comb aside. "I knew it was going to break eventually," he admitted. "I suppose I should be glad it was now, and not before. I probably would have lost the pieces." Shaking his head, he began finger-combing the hair that had snarled around the broken comb back into order.

If he'd thought about it, he wouldn't have done it, it was *far* too forward… but by the time Lan Wangji's mind caught up with him, he'd pulled his own hairbrush out from the drawer by the bedside and was holding it out in a silent offer.

Fortunately, Wei Wuxian didn't seem offended. In fact, his eyes lit up. "Ah! Thank you," he said with a broad smile—

And then turned around.

Lan Wangji froze for a minute. Clearly Wei Wuxian had misunderstood the gesture, and thought that Lan Wangji was offering to brush his hair for him. Which *absolutely* crossed the boundaries of proper conduct, and he should correct the misunderstanding…

Except. Wei Wuxian was *inviting* him to do it. And… Lan Wangji found to his dismay that he didn't have it in him to resist the opportunity.

Wei Wuxian grinned inwardly, humming to himself as Lan Wangji began running the brush through his hair.

Really, he wouldn't be able to get away with conveniently "misunderstanding" things forever – so he might as well take advantage while he could! It had been a *very* long time since he'd been young enough for Shijie to tend his hair. He'd missed it – just the relaxing feeling of sitting back and letting someone else worry about responsibility for a moment.

And oh, it was *wonderful*! The first few strokes were tentative, but Lan Wangji quickly settled into a rhythm of firm, long strokes, and Wei Wuxian found himself closing his eyes, leaning into it just a little.

"So. You wanted to ask something?"

There was just the barest half-second of hesitation, and Wei Wuxian let his lips quirk upward just a little bit. Lan Wangji hadn't *said* anything, but Wei Wuxian had learned his tells!

"Earlier. You said that there were people who had sought you as a cultivation partner, but you turned them down. Why?"

Wei Wuxian snorted. "Because they didn't actually want a *partner*. That was just the excuse."

He could hear the question in Lan Wangji's silence. Smiling wryly, he explained, "The sects competed over *everything*. Fame. Power. Prestige, I think you called it?" Feeling Lan

Wangji's nod, he continued. "That included fighting over powerful *disciples*... and I was one of the strongest."

Lan Wangji huffed at that, and Wei Wuxian just smirked. After all, it wasn't arrogance if it was true! Even at seventeen, his cultivation had been easily a match for cultivators with decades more experience. And much as the other cultivators sneered at guidao, they all knew how powerful it was. What was the point of false modesty?

"But you were the head disciple of the Jiang," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian hummed, rather than interrupting the brushing by nodding. "And that should have been the end of it… except. I am *Wei* Wuxian."

Which had been an anomaly. Normally a head disciple came from the clan – it was too important a position for an outer disciple. On the rare occasion when an outer disciple was chosen, they were usually married in or adopted by one of the branch families.

When Jiang Fengmian had appointed Wei Wuxian as the new head disciple, Madam Yu had flown into such a rage that, on the advice of the Jiang elders, Jiang Fengmian had sent Wei Wuxian on a month-long night hunt, for fear that Madam Yu might actually kill him in her fury. There had never been any discussion of adopting him, even into a branch family, for which Wei Wuxian had honestly been grateful. His name was one of the few things he had of his parents – and the last thing any of them needed was to add fuel to Madam Yu's rants about the latest rumors regarding his parentage.

(He would not have been at all surprised to learn that there had been some factions deliberately fueling the rumors, just to keep the leadership of Lotus Pier divided. Not that Madam Yu's occasional tirades wouldn't have been enough to keep the rumors going with no outside assistance needed.)

"Not a member of the main clan," Lan Wangji murmured, clearly considering the implications. "Which meant… you would have been free to leave if you chose?"

"*Free* is maybe a bit strong," Wei Wuxian said wryly. Leaving the sect that had trained you just because someone else made you a better offer was a good way to ensure that the gossips would forever paint you as a faithless backstabber… unless, of course, they benefited from the move. "But that is the thing." He shifted a little, to give Lan Wangji a significant look over his shoulder. "Taking a cultivation partner was not unlike marrying."

Lan Wangji's pale eyes sharpened. "The lower status cultivator would be expected to join the sect of the higher. And since you were not a member of the gentry…"

Wei Wuxian smiled dryly. "Granted rank certainly didn't count! So even a branch family member had higher status." And most of the offers had come from lackluster cultivators belonging to branch families, looking to bolster their fame with his and assuming that their status alone would be enough to make up for their lack of cultivation strength. Or morals. Or personality. Or even the barest modicum of *intelligence*.

Unfortunately, Jiang Cheng only ever saw his refusals as Wei Wuxian *waiting for a better offer*.

"So it was a means to poach talent, not an offer of true partnership. I can see why you would refuse," Lan Wangji said dryly. And then, unexpectedly, his hands paused again. "*Would* you have been open to taking a cultivation partner? If the offer had been sincere?" he asked carefully.

Huh! Interesting question.

Humming thoughtfully, Wei Wuxian butted his head against the comb to get Lan Wangji's hand moving again. "Not if it were *just* as a cultivation partner," he said firmly. He was perfectly capable of improving his cultivation on his own, and the thought of *using* someone like that… well. It did *not* appeal!

But…

"My parents were cultivation partners," he said quietly. "Not to get stronger, but because they were *partners*. In life, in goals – why not qi as well?" He smiled wistfully. "I think I would have liked something like that. But, well, I knew it wasn't really an option."

As a disciple of Yunmeng Jiang, his first duty had been to the sect, and Jiang Cheng had been too jealous of his time and attention. He'd sulked even when Wei Wuxian flirted with shop girls for loquats or information; there was no way he would ever accept Wei Wuxian marrying. Wei Wuxian had been stubbornly saving his first kiss for love of his life – he wanted it to *mean* something! – but he'd always known that would probably be the farthest it would ever go. So even if he'd treasured the occasional fantasy of something like the one clear memory of his parents…

"Wei Ying?"

"Ah, sorry!" he said hastily, quickly straightening himself up again and hoping Lan Wangji hadn't noticed his sudden distraction.

Because when he'd tried to picture that old daydream… rather than the usual amorphous *someone* as his companion, he'd quite naturally pictured Lan Wangji there.

And that was…

He breathed a laugh. Because really, the most surprising part about that was how unsurprised he was. He *liked* Lan Wangji! Liked him quite a lot, in fact. He was one of the most straightforwardly *good* people Wei Wuxian had met, earnest and careful and with a sneaky sense of humor, and…

And when Wei Wuxian had an idea, Lan Wangji didn't sneer, or call him foolish or reckless or accuse him of showing off. He asked how he could help. It was… nice.

But more than that…

Taking what was basically a complete stranger into your home because he had nowhere else to go? Not something that just anyone would do! Granted, Lan Wangji wasn't just *anyone*. Witness how he'd opened his home to the boys as well! But he'd also let Wei Wuxian stay, long after they could have found other options. Lan Wangji had even gone so far as to insist that Wei Wuxian was *welcome*... and that didn't seem like something he would say out of responsibility alone.

And he'd seen Lan Wangji with the others enough to know that he acted differently with Wei Wuxian than with other adults; there was a *distance* to his bearing that he didn't have with Wei Wuxian.

He couldn't be sure… but the conversation they'd just had made him think he wasn't wrong. It was too intense to be a matter of academic interest alone!

To be fair, Lan Wangji was rather intense by default. But all things considered, Wei Wuxian was beginning to suspect that Lan Qiren's questions earlier had not been only for Mo Xuanyu's sake.

Granted, he'd never actually… *thought* about another man that way. Certainly he hadn't found the offers he'd received after the Sunshot Campaign appealing in the *least*! But on the other hand… well, suffice to say that it had been clear that it wasn't a *relationship* they'd been after.

And none of them had been *anything* like Lan Wangji. It honestly felt like an insult to even attempt the comparison!

Chuckling to himself, Wei Wuxian deliberately relaxed into the brushing again. Well. Now he knew! And… well, with everything going on, it really wasn't the best time to pursue such things. Which meant he could take his time and feel things out until the current chaos had settled a little. Maybe test the waters a bit, even.

And in the meantime, he'd just enjoy all this lovely attention, and…

He slanted a sly smirk in the direction of the door.

See to the training of certain children who were not *nearly* as stealthy as they thought they were and clearly required some extra lessons in sneaking!

Cheeks absolutely *burning*, Wen Yuan hustled Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling ahead of him through the front door and out into the evening air. Because he knew the signs of a Lan Jingyi about to blow. It was bad enough that Wei Wuxian had caught them out, the last thing he wanted was for the man to figure out *why* they'd been snooping!

Luckily, Lan Jingyi was aware of just how good Wei Wuxian's hearing was, so when his self-control finally failed, it was a splutter rather than a shout. "That was— They were— Did you *see* them?!"

Jin Ling snorted. “From the way you’re carrying on, you’d think they’d been making out in there or something.”

“Oh, like you’re not blushing!”

“Sh-shut up! It was just stuffy in there!”

“*Guys*,” Wen Yuan said pointedly, perfectly aware that he was probably as red as they were. Because…

Look, it wasn’t like he hadn’t *seen* some… stuff. Rules against dating didn’t exactly stop his classmates from doing it, he’d almost walked right into a very careless couple in the park once, and it wasn’t like he hadn’t peeked at some X-rated materials out of curiosity.

(He hadn’t had to sneak around to do it, either. All of his guardians were very firm about making sure he had the tools to make *informed* decisions about what he got himself into. Aunt Qing had given him a very thorough and professional sex talk when puberty had led to certain, um, morning problems. Which he’d been prepared for because she had also given him a *pre*-sex-talk talk. Let it not be said that she didn’t take her responsibilities seriously. And then Uncle Ning had sat him down for a very earnest and red-faced consent talk, especially how consent should *always* go both ways and Wen Yuan should tell him if he *ever* had trouble getting someone to understand that no meant no. And Professor Lan had explained how to find ethically produced, um, *educational material* to help him start the process of figuring out what sort of things he was interested in safely.)

But the thing was… what he’d just seen felt so much more *intimate* than any sort of, um, handsiness. Just listening at the door had felt *wrong*, like he’d been intruding on something special and private for just those two.

It was just… they’d looked so *comfortable* with each other. Like it all just… fit.

If he could ever find someone he even felt half so comfortable with… well. As Ouyang Zizhen would say, *life goals!*

Oh man. Ouyang Zizhen would be *so* annoyed that he was missing out on this.

Lan Jingyi turned away from Jin Ling with a knowing smirk, one that turned into a hopeful look directed at Wen Yuan. “So… this is good news, right? He didn’t turn down those offers because they were guys, he turned them down because they were *creeps*. And it doesn’t sound like the *idea* of a guy for a partner bothers him.”

“Not being against the idea of something isn’t the same as being interested in it,” Wen Yuan reminded him.

Lan Jingyi rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know, we talked about that. But it’s a step in the right direction, right?” He glowered at Wen Yuan. “I still don’t see why I couldn’t’ve just *asked*.”

Wen Yuan glared back. “Because there’s a line between *curious* and *rude* and you were about to go barreling right over it.” He had not spent hours filtering all the invasive gossipy prying

out of the project's so-called research questions to let his friends get away with "casually" trying to pull the exact same nonsense, no matter how much he wanted to know the answer, too.

Lan Jingyi made a face, but then he exhaled heavily, slumping in resigned acceptance of the point. "This is why we need Xuanyu and his gaydar!" he complained.

Jin Ling kicked his leg – although thankfully he was still wearing his indoor slippers, so Lan Jingyi's grimace was mostly for show. "You do know that's not actually a thing, right?"

"And Xuanyu has a *lot* going on right now," Wen Yuan added. Which… well, it sucked *so much*, because Mo Xuanyu was way too stressed out right now for the added craziness of meeting Wei Wuxian in person. Even though it probably would help…

Wen Yuan should probably stop throwing Wei Wuxian at his friends' awful situations to fix them. Although, in his defense, it had worked pretty well so far!

Jin Ling made a strangled sound of frustration, pulling at his hair. "I can't *believe* my grandfather did that!"

Wen Yuan winced. "We don't know for *sure* that he did?" he offered tentatively.

Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi both gave identical snorts. "Sure we don't," Jin Ling said dryly, and sighed. "I take it back. I totally believe he *did* it… I'm just not sure what he thinks he's going to get out of going all nuclear option like that."

Lan Jingyi made a thoughtful noise. "You know, you've got a point. It's kind of a scorched-earth move, isn't it? I mean, sure the guy is probably *evil* enough – sorry, Jin Ling…"

Jin Ling rolled his eyes.

"…but it's not really on brand for him. Jin Guangshan's more the," Lan Jingyi dropped his voice in a comical imitation of a crime-lord drawl, "*oops, well isn't that unpleasant, aren't you glad it wasn't any worse?* type of evil."

Wen Yuan started to bite at his lower lip before catching himself – Wei Wuxian had trotted out some rather gory stories about what could happen if you fell or were hit or even just got startled while doing that, so now he was trying to break the habit. It just tended to creep back in when he was thinking. Because… well, Lan Jingyi's take might be kind of cartoonish, but he was right. The Jin Guangshan from Jin Ling's stories was the sort of guy who used stuff like this to *get* something. But taking all of Xuanyu's money, outing him…

"It's almost like Jin Guangshan's trying to make an example of him," he said slowly.

"Yeah, but to who?" Lan Jingyi huffed. "He's not gonna pull that on Jin Ling, it would look bad. And how many people would even know about what he did to Xuanyu, anyway?"

Jin Ling grimaced and looked away. "Or he's trying to back Xuanyu into a corner where he feels like he can't do anything *but* go along. That's his style, too."

Wen Yuan winced. Because, well… he wasn't wrong. "Director Lan won't let that happen," he said, with a confidence that he wasn't entirely sure that he actually felt. Director Lan certainly would *try*, he had no doubts about that. But… he'd picked up enough to know that even Director Lan was feeling pretty deep in over his head when it came to Jin Guangshan. Not to mention whoever had sent Xue Yang after them. Lan Jingyi's cartoony crime lord imitation was a lot less funny in that light…

Lan Jingyi scuffed his foot on the paving stones. "Think we should call him? You know – check in, make sure he's doing okay?"

"Now… might not be a good time," Wen Yuan said reluctantly. "I think Nie Mingjue might still be talking to him." And probably Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen; they knew a lot more about extortion and coercion and what Mo Xuanyu would need to be safe. He didn't want to interrupt, even if he desperately wanted to know how things were going.

He did pull out his phone to fire off a quick text, making sure to include the other two as well. That wouldn't be interrupting, right? Mo Xuanyu could just set it aside and respond when he had the time and energy for it. Wen Yuan just wanted him to know that they were there if he needed them.

That was the idea, anyway. Except that once it was sent, there wasn't anything else they could *do* beyond just… hanging around waiting for a response.

"Um." Jin Ling was fidgeting with his charm again, the tassel almost black in the twilight except for the gleam of the ornament. "Maybe I could text Meng Yao? Just – ask how things are going?"

Lan Jingyi blinked. "Who?"

It took Wen Yuan an embarrassing minute to connect the name to a face. Between all the secrecy early in the project and Nie Mingjue personally taking care of stuff related to him because he was a minor, he hadn't interacted all that much with the other security guys. "I think he's Nie Mingjue's deputy, the one who handles a lot of the computer stuff. You have his direct contact info?"

Jin Ling nodded. "He's the one who picked me up from the station when I got here. He's probably busy, but he might give us an update?"

They shouldn't ask. They really shouldn't. Director Lan had said that the situation was being handled, and the security guys were all really busy…

"…as long as you think he'll actually be okay with it," he said, acutely aware that it was *horribly* weak as a justification. But… Meng Yao had given Jin Ling the number, right? So he had to be expecting it, at least a little?

And… Wen Yuan was getting really *tired* of just hiding in the Jingshi and hoping that everyone else would fix things, to be honest. He wanted to *do* something!

Jin Ling was already tapping out a message. “It can’t hurt to ask,” he insisted. “He’ll tell us if there’s anything we shouldn’t know about.” Text sent, he slid the phone back into his pocket.

Then startled, pulling it back out as it chimed the ringtone for an incoming call.

For a second, he just stared at the screen. “Oh. Wow. That was fast.” Glancing quickly at them, he accepted the call and raised the phone to his ear. “Um. Hi. It’s me. We were just wondering if you… huh? Uh. Yeah, they’re here. Hang on, let me just get you on speaker…”

Lan Jingyi and Wen Yuan hurriedly gathered closer as Jin Ling set his phone to speaker mode and held it out. “Mister Meng?” Wen Yuan said.

Meng Yao’s laugh was a little tinny through the small speakers. “There’s no need to be formal; Meng Yao is fine.”

“Is Xuanyu okay?” Lan Jingyi’s demanded. “You called back super fast!”

“He’s a little shaken, but he should be alright for now.” Meng Yao sighed. “Right now, our biggest concern is that this might just be a warning shot, so to speak. Nie Mingjue has asked me to do a risk assessment – I was actually thinking about reaching out to you three when the text came through. Is now a good time? I know it’s getting late.”

Wen Yuan looked at the other two, knowing that his eyes were as wide as theirs. It *was* late, but… “What do you need?”

“Not much!” Meng Yao assured them. “But you’re bright kids, and you’ve known Mo Xuanyu for a while. It’s possible you’ve noticed things that he didn’t, just because he was too close to the situation. I’d appreciate your input. Don’t worry, it won’t take long. I don’t want you to miss your bedtime.”

Wen Yuan looked at the others. Jin Ling nodded emphatically. Lan Jingyi made a face – he liked his sleep – but nodded as well.

“We’re happy to help however we can,” he assured Meng Yao.

“Thank you.” Meng Yao’s voice was warm. “You really are good kids; I knew I could count on you. So to start off, I understand Mo Xuanyu has been receiving some threatening messages from his family?...”

OMAKE:

Jin Ling: If Mo Ziyuan shows up, I’m punching him in the face.

Wei Wuxian: No no no, kick him in the squishy bits. I’ll give you tips on techniques.

Mo Xuanyu: …my thug of a cousin taken down by my teeny tiny cultivator-trained nephew. I would *pay* to see that.

NOTES:

Confession: turns out that I set myself up for an absolute *headache* with my decision that the history of the sects would be hidden within RL history. In part because the world of MDZS has no actual correlation to RL history – the "historicity" of the setting is all about aesthetics and *vibes*, not events or political landscape (or even culture, really). But also because the political/military history of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period is an *absolute nightmare*. Even knowing that I wanted the Sunshot Campaign to happen not long before the rise of the Sui reunified China, for Reasons, that still left me with a whole lot of mess. (Granted, not exactly surprising – if things were stable, Yang Jian wouldn't have had the *opportunity* to take over and become Emperor Wen.)

Ultimately, I resorted to wiki-walking my way backwards in history, starting with Yang Jian and then just tracking down any particularly colorful characters in his backstory. Which led me to Hou Jing… who, as it turns out, is one of those characters in history who's depicted as so purely *evil* that you almost have to suspect some retconning at work! Once I had him as a Wen Ruohan stand-in, I could break out the history books for more detailed information to fit the elements I had planned…

But it still made me cackle to realize that in fact, the period between Hou Jing's taking control of the Liang court and his death (which was indeed *assassination by a retainer*) adds up to almost *exactly* three years… neatly matching the commonly accepted timeline for the Sunshot Campaign.

(Something that didn't really click into place until I was actually writing this chapter. The first draft of this story definitely involved a lot of "add historical specifics" notes, because I knew the broad strokes of what I wanted but was still figuring out how to get the pieces in place as I was writing.)

(Although, I'm not actually sure where the whole three years thing comes from. In the Villainous Friends extra, there's dialogue suggesting that Wei Wuxian was nineteen during the period that he and the Wens were living in the Burial Mounds, which would make a three-year timeline for the war very difficult to sustain. But the three year version worked for my purposes here.)

Honestly, in hindsight, I probably *should* have thrown RL history to the wolves and just gone whole hog on the AU of History aspect. Among other things, because there's no reasonable way to expect anyone *reading* this story to know any of the history I'm referencing! Which means that there's not a lot of payoff to anchoring things in actual history in the first place. But for the curious, here's a pretty good summary of the primary events I'm working with:

> "*The final four decades of the Southern Dynasties were a very complex period, which saw greater fragmentation of the South than at any time since the collapse of the Western Jin empire two centuries prior. It is helpful to divide this period into three distinct phases. First was the "chaos of Hou Jing," a brutal civil war and succession crisis which began in 548 and led to the destruction of much of Jiankang and its ruling*

> *elite, the enervation of the Liang ruling house, and the functional independence of all of the provincial garrisons; those in Huainan (that is, the area south of the Huai river) and much of the middle and upper Yangzi were taken over by the two northern regimes. The second phase, beginning around 555, saw the reconsolidation of Jiankang as a center of power under Chen Baxian and his heirs, who systematically conquered and eliminated each provincial rival and reasserted a weaker and more circumscribed, but still quite significant, central authority as the Chen dynasty. The third and final phase arrived with the ominous development in 577 of a unified northern regime bent on conquering the South, and the weakened Jiankang regime's inability to marshal an adequate military response, leading to its conquest in 589.*" (The Cambridge History of China: Volume 2, The Six Dynasties, 220–589 (p. 265). Cambridge University Press.)

(Fair warning. When Wei Wuxian was reflecting in an earlier chapter about history books going into "horrifying and occasionally mind-numbing detail" on the power struggles? The chapter on the Southern Dynasties was mostly what I was thinking about. To summarize: don't get attached to any one person, odds are that they'll be assassinated, exiled, executed, or some combination thereof within three paragraphs…)

Just reiterating something from an earlier chapter: tea didn't become an everyday drink until the Tang Dynasty. In the period I'm using for the time of the sects in this story, it was still considered a medicinal drink, and was mostly used by monks as a meditation aid (to avoid afternoon naps!). So yes, the idea of deliberately *removing* the caffeine would definitely seem odd!

The idea of a cultivation partner isn't ever really defined in the novel – I honestly only remember a vague reference to something about Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan having been cultivation partners in their youth. (Which, interesting headcanon possibility there – what if that arranged marriage was actually a shotgun wedding? No, I don't think that was the actual intent, but it is an interesting potential rabbit hole to explore.) The worldbuilding I have here really started out as a thought experiment. If cultivating with a partner is a way of strengthening your cultivation, then logically that's going to affect how women are trained (since they marry out and thus any training they got would benefit a potential rival) – especially since this is a world of arranged marriages, not love matches. That also means that even in a canonically homophobic society like what we see in the novel, there'd be a very weird gray area where homosexuality is tolerated *if* it's seen as just being in service to cultivation. Which would then make it a potential way to poach promising disciples from other sects, since there'd be a weird veneer of respectability to it…

And yeah, Jiang Cheng definitely does not like Wei Wuxian paying attention to other people. It's not just Lan Wangji; he also badmouths Mianmian when Wei Wuxian talks to her. And there's definitely a sense of "how dare you care about them!" regarding his response to Wei Wuxian saving the Wens.

In fact, Jiang Cheng's response to Wei Wuxian's refusal to abandon the Wens, especially his (egregious) declaration that Wei Wuxian is *the enemy of the sects*, always struck me as a classic, "*Fine!* I don't need you anyway! Don't come crawling back to me! (I will absolutely create a situation that will force you to come crawling back!)" As noted earlier, I do think he loves Wei Wuxian… and that's the problem, because his relationship to *love itself* is all

tangled up with his insecurities and his need to feel powerful. So ironically, he *wouldn't* throw Wei Wuxian out of the Jiang in this altered backstory… because with Jiang Cheng coreless, the other sects would see Wei Wuxian as potentially *recruitable*, and that means that (in Jiang Cheng's mind) if he throws Wei Wuxian out, that just means Wei Wuxian is free go somewhere else, rather than being backed into a corner that would *force* him back.

Which… brings me to the very thorny problem of *necessary violence*. And I admit, I honestly have been going back and forth on whether or not I even want to post this… but. Here we go.

Necessary violence is one of those topics where people tend to come down at very different ends of the spectrum, based on personal experience, the moral standards of the society you grew up in, personal ethics, etcetera. Wei Wuxian comes from a context where physical violence was the *default*. And he's canonically a combat pragmatist, that's why he's willing to use guidao to begin with – and that whole conversation with Jin Ling is a direct reference to him helping Jin Ling fight bullies in Jinlintai. Wei Wuxian is fully on board with fighting dirty when necessary… and right now the kids aren't skilled enough to win a fight any other way.

The Lan Wangji of this story is *not* from that context. This Lan Wangji grew up in a safe, peaceful (mostly) environment – in no small part because he grew up in a relatively wealthy and influential family and therefore was never in a situation where he *needed* to resort to violence to defend himself.

Which, honestly, echoes his situation in canon: young Lan Wangji lives in a black and white worldview where good is Good and wrong is Wrong; he wasn't ready to face a situation where doing the right thing required breaking the very rules that he had always taken as guidelines for what the right thing even was. The Lan Wangji of the backstory is clinging to a moral purist viewpoint that has no room for *there wasn't a better option*… and he can afford to think that way, because his status protects him from being forced into that position.

And then there's this exchange at the Nightless City pledge conference.

> *Hidden among such a large crowd, the disciples inside of the arrays all felt rather safe. Bravening up, they shouted, "Even if Jin ZiXun was the one who schemed to ambush you first, you shouldn't have been so heartless and kill so many lives!"*
>
> *"Oh," Wei WuXian helped him analyze, "If he wanted to to kill me, he didn't have to think about whether it was a fatal blow or not, and if I died, it'd be my own bad luck. If I wanted to protect myself, however, I had to think about this and that not to harm, unable to take even a single strand of hair away from him? In conclusion, you all could pull a siege on me, but I'm not allowed to fight back, am I right?"* (ExR 78)

…which is why I facepalm, *hard*, when people say "Wei Wuxian shouldn't have used violence at the pledge conference!"

He did not start that fight.

When he shows up at the conference, he's *using his words*. He tears apart the sects' justifications for attacking him in the first place. And then someone tries to kill him. The novel is very explicit: the arrow barely misses his heart.

It is a blatant murder attempt. Unprovoked. And it happens in full view of *everyone*.

He pulls the arrow out and throws it back at the person who shot it. *One* arrow – the *exact same one* that was used to try to kill him, thrown back at the person who shot it. And the sects use that as their excuse to attack him en masse.

What else is he supposed to do?

Not retaliate against the arrow? They're just going to keep shooting at him! Surrender and hope that after the sects murder him, *this* time they'll keep their word about not killing the surviving Wens, when the sects already broke their word to leave the Burial Mounds settlement alone if Wen Qing and Wen Ning surrendered? Riiight. Not have shown up at all? Then the sects would *still* have attacked, that's the whole reason they were there! And frankly, if it was going to come to a fight regardless, he's far better off fighting them *there*, away from the people he's protecting and not letting them pick the time and place.

Did he expect it to come to fighting? Of course he did. He's lost all his illusions about the morality of the sects. I get the impression that he's even glad that the charade is over. But he does not start the fight.

And once the sects attack, yes, he goes all out on them. *They are trying to kill him*. And in a fight of three thousand against one, the one does not have the luxury of picking his shots, or holding back, or playing nice. The only way to survive is to take as many enemies down as fast as you can, and in a way that ensures that they can't get up to try again. Another reason why fighting in Nightless City, where there aren't noncombatants to worry about, is a good move. (And then a noncombatant jumps into the middle of it anyway. Ouch.)

And the thing is … the whole idea that Wei Wuxian doesn't have the right to defend himself with force is tied to a major theme of the novel.

The cultivation world is one where people like Lan Wangji, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, Jin Zixun and the rest can do whatever they want, from verbal provocation, silencing spells, and lashing out with a weapon, up to and including *outright murder attempts*, and Wei Wuxian (anyone less influential than them) is not supposed to defend himself.

And here's an interesting thing to think about. The whole "I can provoke you as much as I want, you don't have the right to fight back" that the sects use to justify attacking Wei Wuxian? Is *exactly* the same mentality that the Wen sect, in the guise of Wen Chao, Wang Liangjiao and Wen Xu, used to justify *their* behavior.

(Don't get me started on "well he's partially responsible because he went there angry." Of course he's angry, his friends were killed and the sects broke their word before the ashes were cold, you might as well blame him for feeling pain! It's not like he could politely ask them to put the conference off until he calmed down. And most importantly, *his anger had no effect on the outcome*. He could have been as Zen as can be, and they still would have rejected his

arguments, he still would have been shot, and he still would have been forced to decide between letting himself be murdered or fighting back.)

And regarding Wei Wuxian's romantic realization in this chapter… well.

This is one area where I definitely seem to diverge from the mainstream fandom. The whole "mutual pining" and "clueless Wei Wuxian" thing? I don't buy it. In large part because, in my opinion? Wei Wuxian didn't figure out he was in love with Lan Wangji in the backstory for the simple reason that *he was not in love with Lan Wangji yet*.

Cared about. Admired. Respected. Liked. But he wasn't actually *in love*.

Note that, despite the fanon of him gushing about Lan Wangji at the drop of a hat, in the novel there's only *one* instance I can think of where he talks about Lan Wangji outside the context of a recent *encounter* with Lan Wangji – and that's the Lotus Pods extra, implied to be set shortly after Jiang Cheng gets back and thus the Gusu Lan are a natural conversation topic. And while fanon accepts that the name "Rulan" for Jin Ling is a reference to Lan Wangji, it's *Jiang Cheng* (who, as previously noted, is hypersensitive to the *least* hint that Wei Wuxian might be thinking about someone else) who makes that association; "Rulan" is a very elegant and auspicious name on its own. (And, in fact, the two "lan" in question are different words, although they are homophones.)

And similarly, although fandom tends to paint Wei Wuxian as constantly seeking Lan Wangji out, in fact he only actively goes looking for Lan Wangji *once* in the backstory, when he brings Lan Wangji the rabbits. What we see in the novel is that during the Cloud Recesses arc, Wei Wuxian hangs out with Jiang Cheng and Nie Huaisang and gravitates towards Lan Wangji *if Lan Wangji happens to show up*. Which in fact appears to be the pattern throughout the *entire* backstory. You might make a case for offering to carry Lan Wangji during the indoctrination camp or the flower banquet parade as exceptions - but again, Lan Wangji is already *there* (or Wei Wuxian knows he'll show up), so to me it still fits the pattern. Really, the impression I get is that, post-Cloud Recesses (or more accurately, after the Lake Biling hunt), it's *Lan Wangji* seeking *Wei Wuxian* out. Not the other way around.

All things considered? Wei Wuxian seems to have occupied far more of Lan Wangji's headspace than vice versa. Which, you know, makes sense. Wei Wuxian has *way* more going on, and none of it really has anything to do with Lan Wangji.

As I noted way back in the notes at the start of this fic, Lan Wangji actually had very little *impact* on Wei Wuxain's life prior to his death. The Cloud Recesses arc really has almost no lasting effects on the course of Wei Wuxian's life outside of planting the seeds of the relationship. (Even his guidao has more to do with the lotus farmer in the Lotus Pods extra than his BS for Lan Qiren, IMHO.) You could replace Lan Wangji with "random cultivator capable of helping kill the Xuanwu" (yes, I know such a character doesn't exist, but bear with me here) and it wouldn't change the decisions Wei Wuxian makes or the impact of that event on his life. (Except for remembering Wangxian through his fever, which, again, doesn't come into fruition until after his death and revival.) And outside of ensuring that Wei Wuxian survived Nightless City, Lan Wangji's actions there don't really impact Wei Wuxian at all – heck, Wei Wuxian's backstory character arc effectively ends before they happen.

All of those events are important to *Lan Wangji*, because he is the deuteragonist of the story and is going through his own character arc. But take Lan Wangji out, and there's no real impact to Wei Wuxian's character arc. Something that *really* stood out to me as I was putting together Wei Wuxian's backstory for this AU!

For that matter – and here I really break from the mainstream! – I'm not convinced that Wei Wuxian even *liked* Lan Wangji all that much for the majority of the Cloud Recesses arc. While fan works generally portray Wei Wuxian as jumping straight into, "He's a good person! I want us to be friends!", in the novel he never expresses any interest in friendship until the Cold Springs scene.

Which actually makes a lot of sense, because if you step back from our informed knowledge as readers and look *only* at how he behaves? Until he volunteers himself to be punished for going outside the walls, Lan Wangji actually never *does* anything that would show his character as anything other than a miniature Lan Qiren. Hypocrisy and all, given that Wei Wuxian already knows that Lan Wangji is willing to break the rules in the pursuit of enforcing them – see how they met.

(No, helping Wei Wuxian rescue Su Minshan doesn't count, unless you count doing the *bare minimum* to help Wei Wuxian save a member of Lan Wangji's own sect, in public where everyone is watching, counts as evidence of ethics. Especially when he gets there significantly after Wei Wuxian and "assists" in the most dismissive (and frankly, dangerous to the people he's helping!) manner possible. Though, considering that he seems to have been the *only* one out of all the Lan disciples present – Lan Xichen included! – to help at all…)

Yes, Wei Wuxian has a crush – but having a crush doesn't mean you actually *like* the person. (Case in point, *Lan Wangji* during the same period.) And, honestly? Wei Wuxian's antagonism in the library punishment – and I do think he's being antagonistic! – makes a lot more sense from the perspective of him genuinely thinking that Lan Wangji is a hypocrite like his uncle. I think it's significant that when he baits Lan Wangji into destroying the evidence of the porn prank, he talks about how it would *look bad* for Lan Wangji to be seen holding it. He thinks that what Lan Wangji cares about is his *reputation* as the perfect rule-follower, not the reality. And the fact that it worked would reinforce that perception!

(Quick side note: yes, I'm fully aware that none of this accurately reflects what's going on in *Lan Wangji's* head! But I do think it's important to step back from that knowledge and consider what Lan Wangji's actions *look* like in those early chapters.)

By the end of the arc, both Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian have gotten past those initial dismissive assumptions about each other's character, and if Wei Wuxian hadn't left Cloud Recesses it's possible that those mutual crushes might have grown into something more. But he did… and frankly, I get the impression that by the time he reemerges in Yiling after the Burial Mounds, his own crush is pretty much dead. Because crushes take emotional energy, and he didn't have any to spare. After the war, when he finally has a bit of breathing room again, it could have happened. But they plain didn't *interact* enough for the relationship to develop.

And then there's the issue of how Lan Wangji acts towards Wei Wuxian in the backstory.

Wei Wuxian falling in love with Lan Wangji is beautifully expressed in the scene where he jumps out of the tree into Lan Wangji's arms: *He wasn't scared of falling. All these years, he'd fallen many times. But falling on the ground still hurt, after all. If someone was there to catch him, it'd be more than wonderful.* (ExR 87)

Wei Wuxian doesn't *need* anyone to catch him. But he *wants* someone to. He wants to have someone who has his back, who supports him, who backs him up. Someone who respects him, and has faith in him. Someone he can trust enough to let him be vulnerable.

Which is exactly what Lan Wangji *doesn't* do in the backstory.

In the backstory, Lan Wangji does not treat Wei Wuxian as an equal. He is constantly attempting to control Wei Wuxian's behavior, criticizing him, questioning his decisions, attempting to corral and correct and to *fix* him. While it comes (eventually) from a place of concern, throughout the backstory Lan Wangji is always approaching Wei Wuxian with an attitude of "I know best."

Which does make a lot of sense in the context of his background. Lan Wangji grew up in a rigid environment that taught him that there is One Right Way. His only experience with other ways of doing things was in the context of enforcing Lan rules over them. And he's always been the star pupil, the one who knows the Right Answer.

And I really doubt Lan Wangji was ever trained in any possible variant of Cromwell's Rule: to always be open to the possibility, however remote, that you might be *wrong*.

(Not to mention that "you are doing a thing I disapprove of, I will force you to comply For Your Own Good" is clearly something of a pattern in the family, given that we see both Lan Qiren and Lan Xichen acting that way!)

Lan Wangji's absolute assurance of his own correctness does get rattled and shaken after the war, as the cracks in his worldview start growing – and we definitely see the effects of that when they meet briefly after the Phoenix Mountain hunt. But it's telling that apparently it takes him all the way until *then* to figure out that maybe nagging Wei Wuxian about a topic that Wei Wuxian has indicated is closed might, possibly, be counterproductive. And it's very clear that while he acknowledges that he was wrong to bring it up, he's still wholly convinced that he's *right*.

(Something I find very telling: in that meeting in the teashop, he uses *guidao*… but everything else he says is basically cut and pasted from the original confrontation, just in a plaintive register rather than a reproving one; he's made a cosmetic concession while still clinging unquestioningly to his original stance. And when his "evidence" proves ineffective, he just falls back on the blanket statement of "it will happen *eventually*." Which is by nature impossible to disprove. Classic confirmation bias in action.)

And I could write an essay (shocking, I know!) on how I think that's intrinsically bound up in Lan Wangji's original black and white worldview and how the power dynamics of the Cloud Recesses arc left Lan Wangji with the idea that he has a right – worse, a *responsibility* – to make Wei Wuxian adhere to Lan Wangji's idea of what a good person should look like, not to

mention his unquestioning acceptance of received knowledge, and how an emotionally powerful narrative can lead to aforementioned confirmation bias.

But as with his behavior in the Cloud Recesses arc: regardless of what's actually going on in Lan Wangji's head in the backstory, his *actions* mean that during that time period, Lan Wangji is, bluntly, not someone that Wei Wuxian can rely on. He's certainly not someone Wei Wuxian can afford to show any vulnerability toward.

It's not until *after* Wei Wuxian's death that Lan Wangji is willing to accept Wei Wuxian as he is and on his own terms… which means it's only after his resurrection that Wei Wuxian feels *safe* enough with Lan Wangji to fall in love. Which happens very quickly, and the minute Wei Wuxian figures it out, he sets out to investigate whether his hunch that Lan Wangji feels the same is correct. Really, the only mutual pining that happens is the evening of the Yunping Temple confrontation!

Which is why their relationship develops so quickly here. They're meeting as adults, they've had each other's full attention for a while, and they're working cooperatively as partners. Lan Wangji is someone Wei Wuxian feels *safe* with. And with Wei Wuxian's background? That means a lot.

(Just as a side note, I read Wei Wuxian not so much as bi as very thoroughly *demi*. He has romantic ideals and absolutely appreciates beauty for its own sake, but actually falling in love is contingent on him feeling like he can trust someone, first. I also read Wei Wuxian's flirting habits as social, not sexual or even romantic. As a child on the streets, being friendly, flattering and funny would have been a survival skill… and as he got older, "friendly, flattering and funny" would be taken as flirting, even if he didn't play it up. I do think he *does* play it up – but again, flirting is *social*, first and foremost. If you pay attention, the flirt comes out to make people laugh and relax, initiate a conversation (usually to get information), or to get something he wants. And the people he's interacting with *clearly get that*. It's a social game.)

Chapter 22: Relics

Chapter Summary

Some things are hidden in plain sight.

Chapter Notes

Content warning here for A'Qing and ghostly body horror near the end…

Jin Ling glared blearily at the zhou in his bowl and wondered if anyone would notice if he just… put his head down on the table and grabbed another fifteen minutes of sleep.

Meh. Probably a bad idea. That way lay pointed comments about being out and about in the middle of the night. Which was totally unfair, because Meng Yao had insisted on making sure that they finished the call only a little after ten, he stayed up later than that for gaming sessions all the time!

Except that once they'd headed back into the Jingshi and gone to bed, Jin Ling had spent the whole night tossing and turning and twitching awake at every little thing and woke up feeling like he hadn't slept at *all*. Ugh!

Not that it was surprising, exactly, given… well, everything. He'd hoped that talking to Meng Yao would help, at least then they'd be *doing* something about the whole stupid mess – but the things he'd been asking about were all so *basic*, just normal everyday stuff! Jin Ling didn't see how any of it could possibly be useful! But… well, he wasn't a security guy or investigator, either.

"So, what are we doing today?" Wen Yuan asked, *way* too awake for it to be anything but offensive. Then again, he'd already been awake for a couple hours by the time Jin Ling had dragged himself out of bed. Stupid morning people!

Although Wei Wuxian was even more offensive, because Jin Ling knew for a *fact* that he'd been bouncing around way into the early hours of the morning, because they'd actually bumped into each other when Jin Ling had gone to grab himself a drink of water. And by "bumped into" he meant that he'd about jumped out of his skin when the inconspicuous shadow in the garden had *waved* at him!

Although he actually had slept better after that. There was something to be said for knowing that someone even more scary-badass than the bad guys was keeping an eye on things.

But the point was, the guy had been up at least as late as Jin Ling – and, sure, he'd slept in, but so had Jin Ling! But now Jin Ling could barely keep his eyes open while Wei Wuxian was bouncing around and grinning at everyone like he was ready to take on the whole world and would happily start with them.

Maybe waking up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready for anything was just another cultivation superpower. Or maybe he had some super-secret energy elixir? If so, Jin Ling wanted some!

At least Lan Jingyi looked appropriately tired, blinking sleepily like he was seriously contemplating the pros and cons of just faceplanting into his half-eaten breakfast. "We're not training, right?" he mumbled. "There have to be rules for, like, emotional duress. I feel duressed…"

Wei Wuxian's grin was all teeth as he began helping Lan Wangji clear the dishes. "All the better for meditation practice!" he chirped. *Chirped!* Why had Wen Yuan not warned them that this guy was evil incarnate?!

Lan Jingyi stared in dismay before slumping forward onto the table, barely missing his bowl (darn). "How am I supposed to stay *awake*?" he wailed.

"A question you should have considered before going wandering at night," Lan Wangji said levelly, fixing all three of them with a knowing stare that made Jin Ling cringe and look down at the table on pure guilty reflex. *Busted*...

"It was for a good reason," Wen Yuan said, because apparently his basic instincts were broken, or at least seriously miswired. "We were checking on Mo Xuanyu and we didn't want to disturb you."

Lan Wangji did not look impressed by that argument, and Wei Wuxian had raised an eyebrow in a way that suddenly had Jin Ling reconsidering his skepticism of Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi's claims of the cultivator having a Dad Vibe. "That is immaterial. If you must leave the Jingshi, you need to tell us," Lan Wangji said sternly. "Remember that the campus is not secure. I would prefer you remain within the wards on the Jingshi at night."

But it's not like we actually went all that far! Jin Ling was opening his mouth to protest – seriously, they'd been in sight of the Jingshi the whole time! – when he was distracted by Wen Yuan suddenly perking up with a distinctive *oh hey I have an idea* look.

"Didn't you say there used to be wards all around Cloud Recesses?" he asked Wei Wuxian. "Do you think you could put them back? I know it's really been bothering Nie Mingjue that there's no way to keep people who shouldn't be here out of the campus."

"Hm!" Wei Wuxian blinked, drumming his fingers on the table thoughtfully. "…*maybe*," he said after a minute. "But they wouldn't help as much as you're probably thinking. Remember, Cloud Recesses was smaller back then! The old wards would only protect the parts up in this area, not the whole campus." He grinned mischievously. "And they made it so that no one could get in *or* out without a special item! Somehow I don't think that Director Lan would like that."

Wow. That was a wild thought. Yeah, he knew that there were supposedly wards on the Jingshi, Lan Jingyi had gushed about them when he'd arrived, but it wasn't like they actually *did* anything! Or at least, nothing he could see or feel. But what Wei Wuxian was describing sounded more like an honest to goodness *force field*, which was… "Bet people would buy tickets just to *see* that."

Lan Jingyi snickered. "Can you imagine? People lining up to bounce off the invisible wall! Boing! Boing!"

Wen Yuan snickered, and Jin Ling allowed himself a moment of smug satisfaction, because maybe Wen Yuan was hiding it better, but if he thought that was funny then he was just as punch-drunk tired as they were! Hah!

"I suspect my uncle would approve of such a use even less," Lan Wangji said, but Jin Ling could tell even he was amused.

Maybe. Sort of. In a "my face is made of stone and you have to guess about everything" sort of way.

But Wei Wuxian was grinning at the professor, and he seemed to have a handle on reading the guy. "Not to mention that right now, I'm the only one who could make the tokens! It would take *forever* to make enough of them!" He shrugged. "Besides. The wards were built into the walls, and those are long gone by now. I would have to remake them, and that would be *very* difficult, working alone."

"…I guess that means you won't be able to set anything like that up for a while," Wen Yuan said regretfully.

Jin Ling sighed heavily. Because seriously, a magic forcefield to keep the bad guys out sounded like it would be *really* handy, even if it would be a little inconvenient. At least that way they wouldn't be stuck in the Jingshi for hours on end!

"So… what would we need to do to help with that?" Lan Jingyi asked.

Wei Wuxian's grin was all teeth. "Meditate!"

Lan Jingyi blinked, then groaned as he flopped forward onto the table again. "I walked right into that, didn't I?" he mumbled into the wood.

Wen Yuan snickered as he got to his feet. "Yep," he said smugly, grabbing the back of Lan Jingyi's shirt and hauling him upright again. Lan Jingyi moaned woefully, but got up without further complaint, heading for the door leading to the garden.

Wei Wuxian made a cheerful beckoning gesture at Jin Ling. "You, too!"

Jin Ling glowered at him. "How come *I* have to come along?" he groused—

And then wanted to kick himself in his stupid contrarian sleep-deprived mouth, because this was *cultivation training* they were talking about, what was he even *doing*?!

But Wei Wuxian just blinked innocently at him. “You don’t want to learn how to punch people who deserve it?”

Jin Ling snatched up his spoon and shoved what was left of the zhou into his mouth before scrambling up from the table, knowing he probably had squirrel cheeks and not caring. He was *not* going to miss this!

Wen Yuan was hesitating by the door. “Professor Lan? Are you not coming?”

Jin Ling looked over his shoulder to see Lan Wangji picking up his laptop case. “I am meeting with my uncle regarding the next phase of the project,” he said. “I will return for lunch.” He hesitated. “I would prefer that you three remain in the Jingshi today. It is possible that what happened to Mo Xuanyu was intended as a distraction.”

Swallowing the last of the zhou, Jin Ling made a face. It wasn’t like he hadn’t considered the possibility – it was one of many, many thoughts his stupid brain had been obsessing over rather than *sleeping*. But totally upending someone’s life just for a *distraction*? That was seriously low!

Lan Jingyi scowled, clearly thinking the same thing. Shaking off Wen Yuan’s grip on his shirt, he stalked over to the corner of the veranda that had sort of become the designated meditation spot for everyone who couldn’t walk across *water* like a man on a mission, dramatic dragging and drooping abandoned.

When Wen Yuan went to follow, though, Wei Wuxian stopped him with a raised finger. “Ah! Today you’ll be doing something a little different,” he said with a grin.

Wen Yuan immediately perked up. “What…” he started to ask, and then stopped, eyes wide, as Wei Wuxian held up a piece of paper with the looping lines of a talisman. “Really? I get to try?” he breathed.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “After asking so many questions? You might as well! It’s just a simple ward, you know the different parts already. So!” He nodded to a small ink set and brush, sitting on top of a rather large stack of paper.

Jin Ling eyed the setup. “Regular ink? I thought you had to use cinnabar for talismans and stuff.”

Wei Wuxian wrinkled his nose. “Unless you know exactly what you’re doing, cinnabar is *poisonous*,” he said dryly. “No thank you!”

Huh. Okay, good point. “So… what am I doing?” Jin Ling asked.

Wei Wuxian smiled and crooked a finger at him as the man stepped down from the veranda and into the open space of the garden next to the pond, away from the other two. Gulping and wondering suddenly if maybe he shouldn’t have bolted down breakfast *quite* so fast, Jin Ling followed.

“So!” Hands on his hips, Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. “The first step of punching people is to be able to land a hit in the first place. And you are *short*.”

Jin Ling glowered at him. The guy didn’t have to rub it in, especially when Wei Wuxian was stupidly tall!

Wei Wuxian just laughed at him. “That may change someday – you’re still growing, after all! But that doesn’t make the fact that you’re short *now* any less true. So what does that mean if you have to fight an adult?”

“I’m screwed?” Jinx Ling suggested sourly. He’d certainly come out on the losing end pretty much every time he’d gotten into a fight with someone bigger than he was – which of course translated to *freaking everyone*!

Wei Wuxian snorted. “If you let them control the fight? Yes, you’re *very* screwed.” Darting forward, he poked the tip of Jin Ling’s nose. “And *that* means that if you’re fighting someone, you need to *attack*.”

Jin Ling stared at him, feeling kind of like he’d taken a step forward into a drop he hadn’t expected. Like a full-body jolt. “Everyone says *don’t* hit first.”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. “If it means starting a fight in the first place?” He shrugged. “I won’t say never. Only you can decide if it really is worth what will happen if you do. But if the fight *will* happen? You’re small. *You* have to be the one controlling the distance. And that means you need to get *close*.” He smirked. “So. Try.”

“Try,” it turned out, meant the craziest game of tag *ever*, as Jin Ling lunged, leapt, maneuvered, and on at least one occasion tripped over his own feet and somersaulted all over the garden, trying to land just one solid touch on the cultivator.

And he could tell that Wei Wuxian was going easy on him – the guy had *caught a bullet barehanded* and could jump like a freaking *grasshopper*, no way was Jin Ling going to actually going to tag him unless Wei Wuxian let him. But he sure wasn’t making it easy, either!

And it wasn’t *just* tag, because every time Jin Ling *missed*, Wei Wuxian would tag *him* with a light shove or toss and then his job was to roll or tumble or scramble or anything else he needed to get away.

It was… Look, Jin Ling had read enough novels to see what the guy was doing, this was training in evasion and how to fall safely and get back up and keep going, but darn it, it was *fun*!

Although he couldn’t help noticing that while Wei Wuxian was obviously controlling the game to keep Jin Ling from falling into the pond or crashing into the plants, they were obviously pushing the limits of how much space they had. The Jingshi’s garden was a *garden*, and honestly it was kind of starting to look a little worse for wear no matter how careful they’d been.

Which was just a reminder that they were stuck with this thanks to his asshole grandfather, and *rrrgh*…

"*Whoa*!"

Wei Wuxian blinked, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the veranda, and Jin Ling didn't think, he just *lunged*. *Gotcha!*

…except that it turned out to be bait, because of *course* it was, and next thing he knew he'd been plucked off his feet and tucked under Wei Wuxian's arm like some wayward bit of luggage. *Darn it!*

"I see you figured it out," Wei Wuxian called cheerfully.

Wen Yuan spluttered. "It *glowed*!"

Glowed? Seriously? Jin Ling twisted around in Wei Wuxian's grip for a look and snickered; Wen Yuan had fallen back from his little writing desk in an ungainly half-sprawl, eyes wide as papers fluttered down around him. Luckily it looked like he had managed to avoid spilling ink on anything important, but there was a splat of it right on the bridge of his nose, his brush was missing in action, and now Jin Ling *really* wished he'd been able to see the initial reaction, because all signs pointed to it being absolutely *spectacular*.

"Of course it did." From his current vantage, Jin Ling couldn't actually see Wei Wuxian's face, but he could hear the smirk just fine. "You all seem so very disappointed when things don't, after all!"

"I thought you said it was supposed to be a ward, though," Lan Jingyi complained, meditation unsurprisingly forgotten in the excitement.

"It is!" Wei Wuxian insisted. "We used it for students learning to make and use talismans. The glowing helps you know when you've properly activated it."

"…when do I get to do that?" Jin Ling demanded, trying not to sound *too* jealous as Wen Yuan scrambled to get everything in order again, practically glowing himself with enthusiasm.

Wei Wuxian laughed, finally setting him back on his feet. "You can try it with those if you want! They're safe, and it's a good way to practice moving your qi." Reaching over, he ruffled Jin Ling's hair. "Good job, by the way."

Jin Ling tried to glare at him, covering his hair with a hand. "I still didn't manage to get you, though," he grumbled.

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Of course you didn't! You'll need *much* more experience to pull that off! But." He tapped Jin Ling on the nose again. "You saw a chance, and you went for it. *That* is the most important thing to learn. The rest is a matter of practice." He smirked. "And learning to do more than dangle like a baby cat when you get grabbed. You do realize you could have tagged me then?"

Jin Ling opened his mouth, and then blinked as the words sank in. "…*Darn it!*"

While the concept of qi as a scientific paradigm has largely been rejected by Western medical models…

Wen Qing grimaced and hit delete. Accurate or not, that wasn't the tone she wanted to start with.

The cultivation of internal energy, or qi, while deeply embedded in many traditional Chinese arts, philosophies and medical practices…

Ugh. No. Even *hint* at terms like *traditional practice* and the screeds would come pouring out from *all* sides of the old debate. It was practically Pavlovian.

While the existence of qi is debated, the scientific consensus is that it certainly *cannot make swords fly. See Video 1 for proof that the scientific consensus is wrong, wrong, wrong.*

Huffing a frustrated laugh, Wen Qing pushed her laptop aside to bang her head against the table. *Argh*.

"Jiejie?"

"I am going to kill Lan Qiren for dumping this part of the report on me," she declared into the wood.

Yes, she was the logical choice, since she was the one who'd been making an effort to document and study Wei Wuxian's cultivation from a scientific, or at least medical, perspective. And in principle she was wholly on board with getting the word out, especially given what they'd learned about the effects of resentful energy. But she was *not* looking forward to being the one declaring to the world that *flying swords are a thing and oh by the way so are ghosts and did you know that cursed archaeological artifacts are also in fact a problem?*

Granted, as far as the Cultivation Reveal – as she was referring to it in her head – went, it would mostly just be confirming what the general public had already guessed. The simple fact that Wei Wuxian was alive at all was not exactly a subtle hint, and the bullet catch had been in the video, after all. Add in Jin Zixun running his mouth about the "attempted murder" (which she was given to understand that Nie Huaisang was downright gleefully mocking at every opportunity), and it wasn't exactly a hard leap to make.

But the report would be the first place they *officially* acknowledged the fact that Wei Wuxian was a cultivator, with all that that implied, and she already knew there would be pushback. In some cases *because* the general public had already guessed as much, because there would always be people who assumed that if the general public accepted something, *surely* it had to be wrong.

Click.

Her head jerked up. “Wen Ning!”

Her little brother firmly picked up the closed laptop and set it on the top shelf of the bookcase in the corner. “You haven’t eaten anything all morning, Jiejie,” he scolded gently. “Writing the paper will be a lot easier if you’re not hungry.”

Wen Qing almost objected, then flushed as her stomach growled. She’d been so deep in her head that she hadn’t even noticed her stomach gnawing on itself. Sighing, she began putting away the references she’d grabbed so Wen Ning could set the table; she already knew he wouldn’t let her keep working until they’d eaten.

Really, who was the older sibling here? And the doctor! Looking after him was supposed to be her job!

Still. She had to admit that he did have a point. She’d bolted down breakfast to make the meeting with Lan Qiren, and in hindsight that had been longer ago than she’d realized.

“So, what’s the problem?” Wen Ning asked curiously, after both of them had made a decent dent in the food and Wen Qing was nursing a cup of fresh coffee.

Wen Qing huffed. “The problem is that I need to figure out how on earth I’m going to explain that what Wei Wuxian does turns everything from medicine to biology to physics and even *metaphysics* upside down – when I don’t even understand how he does it myself.” Yes, she’d done her best to study it, and to follow Wei Wuxian’s explanations – but that was the barest scratch at the surface of a fundamental shift in the way she’d been trained to expect the world to work.

Wen Ning frowned thoughtfully, chasing a noodle fragment with his chopsticks – although she suspected that had more to do with giving himself something to do with his hands than still being hungry on his part. “Do you think… maybe you might be thinking about it the wrong way?”

Wen Qing raised her eyebrows. It was true that her brother had opted not to continue university-level studies beyond his initial degree; he’d found the academic environment too stressful, too focused on results rather than process. He was far happier with his cameras and his binoculars, finding and photographing wildlife in their natural habitats. But he was anything but stupid, and he’d always been a willing and insightful sounding board for her own ideas. “How so?”

“You’re thinking of it as a research project, so you’re trying to write a research report,” Wen Ning offered. “But you aren’t actually using Wei Wuxian as a research subject, right? He’s someone with a previously unknown medical condition – it’s all observation. So what you’re writing is more like a medical report.”

Huh. Wen Qing turned the thought over in her head, feeling it out. It did seem to have potential. Although… “Medical condition?” she echoed, amused.

Wen Ning blinked innocently. “I mean. He does have an abnormal physiological response to injury, right? It just happens to be *helpfully* abnormal.” He shrugged. “It’s just… you’re

trying to figure out how to explain how it works, right? But you don't know how it really works yet – it'll probably take *years* to figure it out! So of course you're getting stuck."

Wen Qing made a face at him. Still… he wasn't wrong. Her head had been focused on giving *scientific proof* that cultivation was real, and so she'd been reflexively trying to give it a scientific explanation. But how could she, when she barely knew anything about it? Wen Ning was right, what she had for now was observational data that it existed and it worked – the explanations would all have to come later.

She really did grimace then. They'd been mostly thinking about the impact of the project from the perspective of history and politics… but once this report was published, the physicists and medical researchers were going to *swarm*.

And not just around Wei Wuxian. After all, Wen Yuan and Lan Wangji were learning cultivation. From a purely scientific perspective, they would be even more interesting.

That's going to be a mess.

She sighed. "You have a point," she admitted. "It's just going to be tricky to figure out how to do that without violating medical confidentiality."

The fact of the matter was that Wei Wuxian was probably *never* going to have any real privacy, not once he officially entered the public sphere. But she didn't want to contribute to that any more than she had to, and in her opinion, sharing the man's medical information counted, especially when the usual practice of anonymizing the subject's identity would be so futile that it would hardly amount to more than a bad joke!

On the other hand, she didn't have to necessarily make it a *medical* report. It was more the change of paradigm that mattered: observational, not experimental. She didn't have to have a definitive explanation of what she observed; she was opening the conversation.

"Maybe you could ask him to help you write it?" Wen Ning suggested. "Since it's about him anyway. He'd probably have a lot of fun with it!"

She had to laugh. "Probably *too* much fun." Shrugging, she explained, "I will, eventually. But I'd like to get a framework in place first. Wei Wuxian is sharp and he's good at analytical thinking, but formal papers are their own genre of writing and he's not familiar with them. Plus, I need to figure out what belongs in the report and what will go in the paper that he'll officially co-author on." Which was another bit of pressure eased, now that she was out of the tunnel-vision-inducing mindset that she had to get *everything* done in one fell swoop…

Wen Qing blinked, replaying the conversation in her head, and turned a narrow-eyed stare on her brother. "*He'd probably have a lot of fun with it*?" she echoed suspiciously. Because that was not something one would typically assume of a stranger.

Wen Ning grinned. "Oh, I've met him! Or I'm pretty sure I have, anyway."

"…met him," Wen Qing echoed flatly.

Wen Ning nodded. “It was a couple days ago – remember, when I saw the owl nest in the woods near the stairs? I went out that evening to see if I could see the owl, and I met… well. Someone. He didn’t actually say what his name was, but we got to talking, and he asked about my camera and binoculars, and… a couple of the questions were odd enough, I kind of guessed.”

That did sound very much like something that Wei Wuxian would do, Wen Qing had to admit to herself. She just wished she could find the thought amusing. “Please tell me you haven’t told anyone else about this,” she said – begged, almost. Because she trusted Wen Ning, she knew that if anything his moral compass was stronger than hers, but…

Her brother straightened. “Of course I didn’t!” he protested. “That would mess up the game!”

Wen Qing stared. “*Game*?” she asked, wondering if she could possibly have heard that correctly.

Wen Ning blushed. “It’s… kind of silly? Just, after the big announcement went out, a bunch of the students started putting things together and figuring out that Wei Wuxian had to be around, and some of them were saying they were pretty sure they’d met him. So… trying to spot him has sort of turned into a game.”

Wen Qing opened her mouth. Closed it again, feeling strangely off-balance all of a sudden.

Wen Ning looked at her earnestly. “But you don’t have to worry – no one’s going to give him away, that ruins the whole point of the game!” He smiled sheepishly. “Plus, all the media and the fans and the other types hanging around have been getting on everyone’s nerves for a while now. I think just about everyone on campus has gotten hassled, or knows someone who has. So there’s a certain amount of, well, *satisfaction* to know that *we* know he’s around and they don’t.” He blinked at her. “You really didn’t know?”

She hadn’t. Although she probably should have. Unexpectedly, her mind flashed back to the two girls who’d almost crashed into them, the day she’d smuggled Wei Wuxian out of the lab – and their gleeful squealing over the “utterly hot new student.” Really, in hindsight, she had to admit that it was foolish to think that the students *wouldn’t* figure it out. Wei Wuxian was memorable all on his own, completely independent of Yiling Laozu’s fame.

If anything, it was a relief; it meant that the student body was closing ranks around Wei Wuxian and the project. Which… actually wasn’t all that surprising, Wen Qing realized after a moment. Spite was a powerful motivator.

Wen Ning looked up at her tentatively – which was an impressive trick, considering how much taller he was. “Um. If it helps, I’m pretty sure Wei Wuxian knows about it? Neither of us actually *said* anything, but he definitely winked when I figured it out.”

Wen Qing huffed in exasperation, the tight knot of tension in her throat finally easing. “He *would*. That man is probably having far too much fun playing the role of campus cryptid.”

Thoughtful now, she studied her little brother. To be honest, she hadn’t had any plans to introduce Wen Ning to Wei Wuxian. Wen Ning was such a *timid* thing, far more comfortable

with animals than people; surely he'd find Wei Wuxian overwhelming. And yet… "You talked?"

Wen Ning grinned, practically sparkling. "He was really curious about the different lenses for the camera, and then we got to talking about birding, and wildlife photography…" He drooped a bit. "We never did see the owl. I heard it, at one point, but then a helicopter or something went over. They were flying pretty low, and I think they scared it away."

Wen Qing made a face. "Probably the media again. I know the university pulled some strings to control where they can go and who they talk to on campus, but they're not exactly taking it gracefully." Probably because the strings pulled had set off a power struggle between the cabinet members involved in media versus those who had staked a claim in education policy.

Wen Ning pursed his lips. "They should have better manners," he said flatly, and Wen Qing had to blink at the sudden reminder that, yes, her little brother was shy and timid and she'd always tried to protect him as they grew up… and Wen Ning was *also* a tall, powerful man who could spend weeks out in the wilderness tracking wildlife *and* poachers, with a fierce sense of right and wrong that took no prisoners when riled. He'd grown up, and worked hard for that strength.

"Did you ask him about cultivation?" she asked, slightly teasing. After all, she knew perfectly well that some of that muscle had happened because a teenage interest in wuxia – that he'd never really grown out of, she'd add! – had gotten him into bodybuilding in the first place.

Wen Ning ducked his head, bashful again, but smiling. "I mean, no, not in so many words… but we did talk about archery? Because he noticed my calluses." He scratched his head. "Honestly… that's when I was really *sure* who I was talking to. Most people don't even notice things like calluses. He not only noticed, he recognized what they were from. I suspected, before, but…" He shrugged awkwardly. "He was friendly… and *kind*. I guess I didn't really expect that."

Wen Qing had to laugh a little at that as she poured the last of the coffee from the warmer into her cup and began stacking up the lunch dishes. "There are a lot of things that we never expected when it comes to him," she agreed wryly.

Wen Ning pointedly took the dishes away from her – which wasn't the way it was supposed to work, because he was the one who'd cooked, they had a *system*, but her little brother was a cheating cheater who used weaponized doe eyes to win arguments. Grrr.

Also, he'd been right. Now that she'd had a break from writing, she could see the way her focus had narrowed into counter-productive tunnel vision. With a little distance, she could see how to separate out the *report* from the followup paper that would actually lay out what they'd learned about cultivation so far.

Darn it. Why did little brothers have to be so *smart* sometimes?

"*Auuuugh*. Wen Yuan, how do you *do* this without *melting your brain*?!"

Normally Lan Jingyi would have expected Jin Ling to say something snippy in response, and he actually had his brilliant cutting rebuttal prepped and ready – but Jin Ling was busy glaring at his own copy of the ward talisman, as if he was trying to either will it to light up or maybe just set fire to it with his eyeballs.

Wen Yuan was slanting an amused look in the other boy's direction. "You know, scowling doesn't actually make it work any better," he said, from the lofty heights of someone who actually *could* get the talisman to activate. Although it still wasn't reliable even for him, which helped explain why Wei Wuxian had insisted on him making so many of them!

"It *might*," Jin Ling shot back truculently, although it was pretty obvious that he was mostly arguing because that was what he *did* rather than out of any actual sense of conviction. "At least I'm not melting my brain."

Oh, it was on. "There is no way you're actually getting this before I do," Lan Jingyi informed him.

Jin Ling eyed him. "Oh yeah?"

"Oh you *bet* yeah," Lan Jingyi countered, waving the talisman he'd been meditating at. "Or did you miss the part where he said this thing is a ward against *ghosts*? I've got some serious motivation going here!"

Jin Ling snorted. "Come on, we're talking the actual real world here, ghosts aren't *that* big a deal." But then he hesitated, sliding a curious glance over at Wen Yuan. "…Are they?"

Wen Yuan paused before putting his own copy of the talisman down with a care that meant he was fighting the urge to fidget with it. "I think ghosts – and just resentful energy in general – are a way bigger deal than anyone realizes," he admitted. "In part because no one knows they're there. Or if you *do* notice, it's easy to convince yourself that you're just imagining things."

Uh-oh. That sounded bad. Lan Jingyi quickly put his own talisman down and turned his full attention on Wen Yuan. "What do you mean?" he asked uneasily.

Wen Yuan smiled apologetically. "Well… you know how there are always crazy stories going around about artifacts from this or that dig are supposedly cursed or haunted? So… turns out that when it comes to the oracle bones, it's actually true."

"Are you *serious*?!"

Lan Jingyi wasn't actually sure if that was him or Jin Ling, but he was gonna go with Jin Ling because no way would his own voice *actually* hit that particular pitch.

Wen Yuan nodded. "Wei Wuxian says it's because no one really knew how to… clean the energy up, I guess, when they were done using them. So it just sort of hung around knotting itself up over time." He shivered. "The scary thing was that there wasn't anything you could actually point at and say *that's bad*, except that it was kind of cold around them. Then Wei

Wuxian did something to make it visible, and suddenly there's this… black *fog* everywhere, except that I could tell that it wasn't really my *eyes* seeing it."

Lan Jingyi stared at him. "I am never ever *ever* going into a museum again," he said fervently, seeing Jin Ling nodding desperately out of the corner of his eye. Seriously, how was he supposed to sleep tonight with *that* bouncing around in his head?!

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that! Wei Wuxian and Professor Lan did a whole cleansing ritual on the oracle bones in the collections, so they're okay now," Wen Yuan hastily assured them. "But… it was weird, because we had cameras set up when they were doing it, and… you can definitely tell that there's something there and stuff is happening, but… it doesn't look anything like what Professor Lan and Wei Wuxian said that they *saw* happening. So it seems like a lot of that stuff doesn't actually happen on the visible spectrum, you know? You have to be a cultivator to actually see it."

Whoa. Lan Jingyi blinked. "So… cultivating opens the third eye, that sort of thing?"

Wen Yuan frowned thoughtfully. "I think it's more like… not synesthesia, exactly, but more like perceiving qi is its own sense, and then it feeds into your other senses? Kind of like how a lot of what we think of as taste is actually our sense of smell."

Huh! That… actually made a lot of sense. "So… cultivating is kind of like training your senses to actually *notice* what's already there?"

Jin Ling snickered. "Are you *really* sure you want to learn? Think you're up to seeing the *spooky* side of things?"

Lan Jingyi stuck his tongue out. "I'll take that over knowing it's there and *not* seeing it," he said loftily.

Wen Yuan shook his head, smiling ruefully. "Honestly… ghosts are scary, yeah. But… a lot of them are more *sad* than anything else."

Jin Ling blinked. "You've actually *seen* ghosts."

"Not always *seen*, my cultivation is nowhere near strong enough for that unless Wei Wuxian helps… but yeah, a couple." Wen Yuan suddenly chuckled. "Well, A'Qing was scary, but that was because she was making a *point*. Honestly, she was mostly just awesome."

"A'Qing?" Lan Jingyi asked warily, trading a nervous glance with Jin Ling.

Wen Yuan huffed out a long breath. "So… the whole thing with that Xue Yang guy? A'Qing was the ghost of someone he murdered. So when she realized that Wei Wuxian could actually see her, she helped him stop Xue Yang."

Huh. That was… spooky, but yeah, also pretty darn awesome. "So… sometimes cultivators also get ghosts to help out? That's kinda cool."

Wen Yuan frowned. "I actually think it's more a *Wei Wuxian* thing than a cultivation thing? Apparently it was kind of his deal, before – coming up with ways of dealing with ghosts

outside of traditional methods."

Wow. Now that was a crazy thought. Xianxia was chock full of lost techniques and ancient secrets – not so much people coming up with something new. "So he's like a cultivator version of Su Song? That's *wild*!"

"I think he really is." Wen Yuan looked down at the table. "That's probably part of why he's adapted so well. He's used to thinking of *new* things."

Lan Jingyi tilted his head, puzzled. That… didn't sound very enthusiastic. Glancing at Jin Ling, he saw that the kid was scowling, his trademark *you're making me worried and I don't want to admit it* glower.

Fine, if Jin Ling was going to be emotionally constipated about it, then Lan Jingyi would ask. "Is something wrong with that?"

"Not in itself, it's just…" Wen Yuan sighed. "It sucks that he's *losing* so much. You know? Even his language. Yeah, it's great that he's picked up the modern language so fast, but… he's never going to be able to just casually talk to someone in his *own* language ever again." He made a face. "And I bet you that when people hear about the comb breaking, they won't even *care* that it means he's lost something he cared about, they're just going to start bleating about how it's proof that we should take away *everything* that he came out of the ice with because they're *precious artifacts* that should be locked up for *safekeeping and study*."

Jin Ling rocked back a little bit at that, blinking at Wen Yuan's uncharacteristic vehemence. Lan Jingyi was a little less surprised; Wen Yuan had had a *lot* to say about the mess with Professor Yao, once he'd had someone that he could rant at in person without risking the project's security.

Wen Yuan glanced at Jin Ling and flushed a little. Sorry," he said. "It just… well. It sucks. He's already lost so much, and sometimes it feels like he just keeps losing *more*."

Jin Ling bit his lip for a moment. "I was… kind of thinking about that. Do you think…" He hesitated. "Do you think we could get a replacement for that comb made? I know it wouldn't be the same thing, but… it sounds like it was a present from someone he really cared about, you know?"

"That would probably be really expensive. Lavender jade isn't cheap, and it would have to be custom made," Wen Yuan said, but there was definitely a note of wistful longing to it. Which Lan Jingyi got; he knew that Wen Yuan had a couple things from his parents and grandmother that he really treasured. The comb thing probably hit pretty close to home for him *and* Jin Ling.

Right then! "I bet we can make it work," Lan Jingyi said stoutly. "So long as we can find someone who can do the design right, we can probably come up with a way to pay for it *somehow*."

"I can handle that part," Jin Ling said dismissively.

“Yeah, unless your grandfather decides to cut you off for not doing his bidding,” Lan Jingyi pointed out. Which… okay, maybe that was a little blunt, Wen Yuan was giving him a Look, but it wasn’t like ignoring the obvious was going to help anything, either!

Besides, Jin Ling just waved a hand. “All the more reason to spend his money now, while I still can, right?” he countered, and frowned. “It’s the design that will be the hard part. I didn’t get a very good look at it, but it seemed sort of familiar?”

Lan Jingyi frowned. “I think it might have been a flower? Pretty normal sort of comb thing…”

“It’s a lotus,” Wen Yuan said. Getting up, he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a portable hard drive. “Here, Wei Wuxian let me and Lan Wangji take pictures of his stuff a while back…”

“And *you’re* keeping the files?” Jin Ling asked, even as they gathered around the laptop.

Wen Yuan smiled ruefully, plugging the drive in. “There are backups on the project server – but yeah. I mean, I’m handling the editing and metadata, so it made sense. Besides, Professor Lan is keeping all the original hard copy notes and stuff, so he’s a little tight on storage space.”

Lan Jingyi leaned in as Wen Yuan opened up one of the photos. “Yeah, that’s a lotus,” he agreed after a moment.

“Apparently it was the symbol of his sect,” Wen Yuan explained. “He’s got a couple things with that design.”

Jin Ling started. “Wait, really?” he blurted.

When they both blinked at him, he explained, “Look… my grandfather’s always collecting fancy art and stuff. And I’ve definitely seen a couple things with that design on it. He’s even commissioned some stuff.”

Lan Jingyi straightened. “Have you got pictures?” he asked eagerly.

Jin Ling hesitated. “Probably some. Why?”

Lan Jingyi waved his hands. “Because a whole lot of archaeological artifacts from back before the Cultural Revolution ended up as art pieces!” he said. “What if some of the stuff your grandfather has is actually from Wei Wuxian’s time?”

Wen Yuan huffed. “You do realize what an insane coincidence that would be?”

“Well, yeah. But wouldn’t it be *awesome*?” Lan Jingyi argued, and flapped his hands at Jin Ling. “C’mon – pics!”

Jin Ling rolled his eyes dramatically, but he did start scrolling back through his photos. “Here,” he said after a minute. “I took a whole bunch back when we had that end-of-term art project…”

Wen Yuan's eyebrows went up. "Oh," he said. "Some of those really *do* look like they're using the same symbol, don't they?"

"Some stuff is from the old property in Wuhan," Jin Ling said. "Some of it he started collecting recently…"

Wen Yuan stiffened. "Wait. Go back for a minute."

Jin Ling paused, flipping back to a picture he'd skimmed past, and made a face. "*Ugh*. Why do you want to look at naked lady art?"

"Not that." Wen Yuan took the phone – just barely short of snatching it from Jin Ling's hand – and used his fingers to zoom in, eyes narrowed and intent. Jin Ling sent a baffled look Lan Jingyi's way, but he could only shrug – he had no idea what was so interesting about Jin Guangshan's hand!

Voice still strangely tight, Wen Yuan said, "Jin Ling – do you have a better close-up of the ring your grandfather's wearing here?"

"The ring?" Jin Ling blinked. "I mean, probably? He wears that stupid thing *all the time*, ever since he got it last year. Give me a minute…"

He took the phone back, quickly swiping through the pictures. After a while, he handed it back to Wen Yuan. "There, that should be a pretty good one. Why?"

Wen Yuan took the phone, studying it for a long minute, and then swallowed. "Jin Ling. You need to send that picture to Xiao Xingchen."

"Wait. Some old ring?" Lan Jingyi asked. "You're going to bother him over that?"

"Yeah. Because it's not just an old ring. It's *really* old." Wen Yuan drew in a bracing breath. "I *recognize* it, guys. It's the Three Gorges Ring – it turned up when they were doing salvage archaeology ahead of building the dam. And a year ago, *someone stole it*."

Jin Ling froze.

And… Lan Jingyi got it. He did. They'd certainly *theorized* a lot about what Jin Guangshan was up to, but… there were suspicions, and then there was finding actual *proof* that Jin Ling's grandfather was involved in something criminal.

But Jin Ling was tough. After a moment, he visibly steeled himself, then closed his photos and opened the messaging app. "Do you have Xiao Xingchen's number?" he asked.

Before Wen Yuan could answer, the phone in Jin Ling's hand buzzed with an incoming call. Startled, he blinked at it. "It's Meng Yao," he said. "Gimme just a sec…" Swiping to pick it up, he raised the phone to his ear. "Um, hi. What… Yeah, they're here, why?"

A second later, he lowered the phone. "He says he wants to talk to us."

Lan Jingyi and Wen Yuan blinked and glanced at each other, both shrugging. “Maybe he forgot to ask about something last night?” Lan Jingyi suggested.

“Maybe…” Setting the phone on the desk in front of them, Jin Ling switched to speaker mode.

“*Hello, boys*,” Meng Yao said warmly, but with a hint of something rueful in his tone. “*I hate to do this after keeping you up last night, but I need to ask a favor…*”

“An artifact from your collections?” Wei Wuxian blinked.

“Mn.” Lan Wangji set the case down on the desk with care. It wasn’t, objectively speaking, all that heavy, even factoring in the weight of the wooden case and internal packaging meant to protect the contents. But it *felt* heavy, if only with the gravity of time. “The Jade Sword was found in the same area of the old archives where your Feng Xie Pan was kept. It may date from your time as well. Uncle wished your opinion on the matter.”

Wei Wuxian’s face brightened as he capped his pen and closed the notebook he was writing in. He still preferred a brush for jotting notes and brainstorming; while he was getting accustomed to modern writing implements, a lifetime of muscle memory was not easily put aside, and he preferred not to deal with the distraction when focused on the content of his work. But he’d gleefully adopted the use of a brush-tipped pen for anything not directly related to talismans or wards.

For that matter, Lan Wangji had more than once seen him cheerfully tapping notes into his tablet with the speed and precision of a schoolgirl working on a webnovel during her commute on the subway. Likely because he had no competing muscle memory obstructing that process.

At least, he assumed that they were notes. But he had overheard Wei Wuxian asking Wen Yuan about apps for learning to program, so… possibly not.

Tucking the notebook away into a pocket, Wei Wuxian joined him at his desk. “You think it might be a spiritual sword?” he asked, studying the case with interest.

“I know it is unlikely,” Lan Wangji admitted. Although he did feel a little less foolish for *hoping*, now that Wei Wuxian had voiced the same thought.

The cultivator hummed, tilting his head, and then tapped the edge of the box with his finger. “Well. There’s no resentful energy here, at least!”

That… was not a possibility that had occurred to him. And it should have, given that the entire purpose of a sword was to fight and kill other people. “Was that common?”

Wei Wuxian grinned up at him – something that, to his chagrin, Lan Wangji found no less distracting now than when they first began working together. “Less than you’re probably thinking,” he said reassuringly. “Especially ordinary swords! They’re tools for a purpose; it takes a lot more than simply using them as they’re meant to warp them.”

“And spiritual swords?” Lan Wangji asked pointedly.

Wei Wuxian’s grin faded slightly, rueful. “That can be more common,” he admitted. “Especially if the sword’s cultivator died badly.”

Lan Wangji hesitated. Part of him didn’t want to know, but… “What would constitute a bad death?”

Wei Wuxian blew out a breath, crossing his arms thoughtfully. “An angry death. Or… not just angry, but if one dies cursing the world. Qi deviation can cause it, as well; with the spiritual energies so messed up, the ghost can’t pass on.” He shrugged. “The gentry had… hm. Ghost calming rituals, that they did when they were children, to make sure they wouldn’t become angry ghosts – that wouldn’t do, after all! But even those just made it *less likely*, not impossible.”

Ah. “And spiritual weapons are bonded to the wielder,” Lan Wangji murmured. “If the cultivator became an angry ghost, their spiritual weapon could become an anchor for their power.”

“Exactly!” Wei Wuxian beamed at him, then tapped the crate again. “But since that’s not the case with our friend here…” He looked expectantly at Lan Wangji.

A flicker of mischief made Lan Wangji say, “If it poses no immediate risk, perhaps we should return it to the collections. After all, it is not immediately pressing…”

“Lan Zhaaan!” Wei Wuxian flopped dramatically against Lan Wangji’s side to stare beseechingly up at him. “Taunting me like this! How cruel can you be?!”

Lan Wangji kept his face expressionless, but he couldn’t help being amused. By now, he and Wei Wuxian had their own rhythm to these exchanges; he’d learned to gauge the difference between Wei Wuxian deflecting from something and simple playfulness, and this was most definitely the latter. It was… fun, to have someone who knew him well enough to have little inside jokes like this.

Besides. Wei Wuxian clearly took great delight in having a straight man to play his ridiculous theatrics against, and who was Lan Wangji to deny him?

Even if it did mean that he had to sit on his wayward imagination to keep it from wandering in an… inopportune direction.

“Perhaps you might benefit from deferred gratification,” he said blandly, but he was already removing the lid of the crate.

The moment the sword was uncovered, Wei Wuxian went still, playful silliness vanishing. “Oh,” he said softly, eyes widening.

“You recognize it,” Lan Wangji said, watching the man intently. “You knew the wielder?”

Wei Wuxian’s lips quirked in amusement. “You could say that, I suppose.” Reaching out, he lightly rested his fingers on the crossguard. “Hello, Bichen,” he murmured.

His voice was so affectionate that Lan Wangji half-expected the sword to respond in some way – but it didn't. Even so, Wei Wuxian smiled before looking at him again. "Well, that explains why it was with my compass!" he said. "This is Lan Yi's sword."

Lan Wangji blinked, taken aback. Yes, he had – somewhat selfishly – hoped that the Jade Sword was a spiritual sword left behind by some long-ago cultivator… but somehow he hadn't considered that it was most likely a *Lan* cultivator's sword. And for it to have belonged specifically to the friend that Wei Wuxian had mentioned so often seemed too good to be true…

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian was right: given that they already knew that the prototype compass that he had given Lan Yi had been in the archives, perhaps they *should* have anticipated that more of her belongings would have been stored there.

As he was thinking, Wei Wuxian carefully lifted the sword from the case, running his fingers lightly along the blade and hilt in a quick but careful inspection. "What happened to the scabbard?" he asked.

"It did not survive the passage of time so well," Lan Wangji admitted. The original cache had been inside a bricked-up vault on the grounds, probably closed off during one of the many renovations that the complex had undergone over the centuries. The closed environment had contributed greatly to the preservation of the contents… but it had still been far from archival conditions. Cloud Recesses had been given that name for a reason; the varying humidity levels from the frequent mist and fog had caused the leather and wood to rot away almost to nothing. The remnants were still in the archives, but beyond the metal fixtures almost nothing was left.

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. "Ah, that explains why you didn't know the name."

The name… ah. That was right, Suibian's name had been written on the scabbard.

Which raised an interesting question. "Is it sealed?" he asked. Although… *could* a sword seal itself, if the scabbard decayed away around it? Obviously the curators had been able to remove it from the remains of the scabbard; would a seal have faded over the centuries?

"Interesting question," Wei Wuxian mused. "It might not have been. Lan Yi cultivated with her sword, of course – everyone did! – but she preferred her guqin."

Interesting. So the sealing of a sword wasn't just a matter of the cultivator's strength, but also the degree to which they focused on a particular tool? Although Wei Wuxian had also said that swords sealing themselves had been more legend than reality before Suibian had done so. Perhaps, for whatever reason, Lan Yi had never crossed that threshold.

"Even if it had sealed… You are her descendant. Her heir, even!" Grinning, Wei Wuxian offered Bichen's hilt.

Part of Lan Wangji wanted to scold him; whatever the sword might once have been, it was a venerable piece of the history of Cloud Recesses now, not something to simply wave around. The other part…

His hand closed around the hilt.

It felt…. Well. Awkward, for one thing, given how degraded the grip was; like the scabbard, the wood and leather had been more vulnerable to the passage of time. That there was still a grip at all was frankly astounding. It would have to be replaced, if Bichen was ever going to be used as a sword again.

The simple fact that he was even contemplating that as an option was telling. The sword was an *artifact*, and infinitely more important than anyone had realized, they shouldn't even be handling it without gloves…

Taking a settling breath, he slipped easily into the light meditative state he'd learned to maintain while playing the guqin. Immediately, he could feel the difference. His guqin was familiar from years of practice; it had honestly seemed like an extension of himself long before he learned to channel qi through wood and string. The sword, however, felt alien in his hand, no more responsive to him than… well, a length of steel.

The disappointment came as a surprise. He enjoyed wuxia and xianxia, but he'd never considered a sword in and of itself to have any particular appeal. And yet.

"I may be too distant a descendant," he made himself admit at last, offering Bichen back to Wei Wuxian. "I do not think it will allow me to use it."

Wei Wuxian crossed his arms, giving Lan Wangji an amused look. "Not *immediately*, perhaps. You only just met! And you aren't trained in how to use a sword, either. Of course it's difficult."

Ah. He had not considered that aspect.

Lan Wangji turned the thought over in his head for a moment, then stood. The boys were ensconced in their room, supposedly doing homework – although he suspected they were busy gaming instead, by the excited tone in the faint hum of their voices. Either way, it meant that the garden was available, and he was spared any audience save Wei Wuxian, who'd gamely followed him.

Stepping down into the open space that was by now unofficially accepted as the training ground, he paused for a moment, breathing slowly as he tested the weight and balance of the sword in his hand. Then he settled into the first stance.

He kept it simple; as noted, he'd never had any particular fascination with swords in and of themselves, so he'd never put much effort into learning the stances of taijijian. Still, he was familiar enough with them to feel the difference. Bichen was longer and heavier in his hand – although the lack of a proper grip definitely affected that, making it harder to hold and throwing the blade off-balance. Even so, he could feel the balance it *should* have had, the way it was made to settle in the hand.

The sword had never really struck him as *incomplete* before. It was an artifact; the ravages of time were as much part of it as its original shape. But suddenly, Lan Wangji felt almost as if

he were looking at a falcon with a wounded wing, achingly aware of how much more it should be capable of.

And even so…

Concluding the sequence, Lan Wangji looked down at the weapon in his hand, trying to sort through his thoughts. "…It will take some time to get used to."

Wei Wuxian hummed agreement. "Of course! Using a true weapon feels different than using a practice one, no matter how well-made. Your qi flows differently."

Why would that be, Lan Wangji almost asked, before he realized that he already knew. Even on a purely psychosomatic level, knowing that you were handling a real weapon caused true, measurable changes in performance and mindset. Given the way mental state and expectations affected qi, of course it would have an effect. Add in the things Wei Wuxian had said about how the intended purpose of an item and its history of use also shaped the flow of qi…

Shaking his head, Lan Wangji returned to the veranda; now that he was not actively working with it, it felt extremely wrong to be standing in his garden with a bared sword in hand. Setting the sword back into the crate, he turned to Wei Wuxian – and blinked, because at some point the man had pulled out his notebook again. But he wasn't jotting notes, but rather a series of sketches that looked like…

"Stances?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian made an affirmative sound, turning the page to start a new series of sketches. "The basic forms aren't bad, but you're used to a much lighter sword, I think."

Lan Wangji flexed his wrist, feeling the fatigue in it. "Yes," he admitted. Most swords available for taijijian practice were more in line with the display swords used in wushu, with light, thin blades meant to flash and rattle – designed for effect rather than efficacy. A single serious blow from Suibian would likely go straight through them.

Wei Wuxian nodded, tapping the handle of the brush against his cheek. There was a tiny little furrow of concentration between his brows, and Lan Wangji was very carefully *not* imagining reaching out and smoothing it away with his thumb. "Bichen is a good sword for you – it's lucky Lan Yi was so tall!" he chuckled. "Most of what you need is practice. You have the strength to wield it, but not the technique."

Lan Wangji looked at the drawings. Now that he had some context, he could see that Wei Wuxian had been sketching out the stances and transitions as he'd been moving through them, notes added here and there in quick cursive. Now, underneath the sketches, he was adding new ones, clearly modifications of what he had seen.

Grinning, Wei Wuxian offered him the notebook. Lan Wangji accepted it, feeling… slightly perturbed, to be honest. He was not sure it would ever have occurred to him to *modify* the taijijian stances; somehow the very notion seemed… irreverent? Impertinent? Sacrilegious?

And yet, even as sketches made with only a few quick brush strokes, he could see the way it would work with the length and weight of Bichen in his hand.

Wei Wuxian twirled the pen in his fingers, although he almost fumbled it for a moment; he was still getting used to the feel of smooth, lightweight plastic rather than wood or bamboo. "Some of the stances are based on Lan forms," he admitted. "The style will suit you, I think."

Lan Wangji couldn't say that the thought didn't appeal – and it helped that discombobulated feeling, to know that the changes were drawing on the traditional style of his own ancestors. In fact… "Would you be able to recreate the Lan style in its entirety?" he asked, flipping back through the notebook to find the start of the sequence.

"Perhaps not *all* of it," Wei Wuxian laughed. "I was never trained in those forms. But I do know enough to do more than simply basics… Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji hesitated. He'd turned farther back than he'd intended, onto a page of notes on a different topic. And normally he would have ignored the contents – he had no right to pry into anything Wei Wuxian had not chosen to bring up – but he recognized many of the names, if not the mess of lines and arrows haphazardly connecting them, many scribbled out and redrawn in new configurations, sometimes more than once.

"Wei Ying?" he said. Not *asking*, exactly, but… inviting, if the man were interested in discussing it.

Wei Wuxian blinked, craning his neck slightly to look at the page. To Lan Wangji's relief, when he tilted the notebook to show what he was looking at, Wei Wuxian's face brightened. "Ah! I went back through A'Yuan's history book this morning. If your Mo Xuanyu's theory about Hou Jing is correct, I thought it would be good to take a closer look at what came after."

Which explained the notes about the Chen, as well as the Northern Wei. "You are attempting to reconstruct what happened to the sects?"

"At least the basic shape of it." Capping his pen, Wei Wuxian laced his fingers together and stretched his arms. "My guess is… well. We already knew the balance of power between the sects was unstable after the Sunshot Campaign! So the Chen clan taking power after Hou Jing brought down the Liang…"

"Could best be interpreted as one sect rising to dominance," Lan Wangji concluded, nodding. They had already hypothesized as much, after all. "Have you any thoughts which one it might have been?"

Wei Wuxian snorted. "Any one of them would have happily *tried*." Then he paused, frowning slightly. "Well. Not the Jiang, I think. Jiang Cheng was never… huh. Wanting to increase your status simply because you want more people to bow to you? Trying to get more power for the sake of having more power?"

"Ambitious," Lan Wangji suggested, and wrote the character in a corner of the page when Wei Wuxian passed him the pen.

Wei Wuxian considered the term, then nodded. “He wasn’t ambitious, at least not in the sense of wanting to rule *more* than he already did. Sect Leader Jin, on the other hand…” He huffed. “He would have *liked* to be another Wen Ruohan. I just don’t know if he could have done it. The Jin took less damage in the war, but everyone knew that was because he only joined when it was clear that we would win.”

“That would make it hard to draw people to his banner,” Lan Wangji agreed.

Wei Wuxian nodded. “Not without a new enemy to get the sects to work together again,” he agreed, and frowned. “Although… Sect Leader Jin wanted power, but I don’t think he would have been interested in *conquering* the other sects. He was always the sort who got other people to do things, rather than acting directly. And even if he had become a conqueror…” He made a face. “I may not have liked the Peacock, but I can’t see him going along with it.”

May not have liked was probably an understatement, given that Wei Wuxian had gone out of his way to learn the word for peacock *specifically* to use it when speaking of Jin Zixuan, the Jin heir and Jiang Yanli’s eventual husband. “Would his opposition have been enough?”

Wei Wuxian’s grimace this time was far more serious. “It may not have. Especially if he was the one recorded in the histories as Chen Baxian’s heir.”

Lan Wangji frowned slightly and glanced at the scrawled notes. Ah. He’d forgotten – the son of Chen Baxian, Chen Chang, was little more than a historical footnote, because when the time came to inherit, he’d been a hostage to the Northern Zhou, so the kingdom had gone to a cousin instead. A cousin who had then arranged for Chen Chang to be assassinated on his return after the Zhou finally released him, since the new ruler had no interest in allowing a potential rival to live.

Lan Wangji could see why Wei Wuxian would be ambivalent about that. No matter how much he may have disliked Jin Zixuan on a personal level, it was one thing to know that the man – and everyone else Wei Wuxian had known – was long dead. It had to be completely different to read about *how* someone had died in the clinical off-handedness of a history that dismissed those lives in the span of a few brief sentences in the march of decades and dynasties, all the while wondering which names might actually refer to people he knew.

But Wei Wuxian seemed more intrigued than anything else, tapping his finger against his cheek. “And honestly, I don’t know what to make of the Sui, especially with General Yang taking the name *Wen*,” he said, shaking his head as if in amazement. “I can’t see anyone connected to the sects doing that without a very pressing reason.”

Lan Wangji blinked. It wasn’t the same character – wasn’t even the same *tone*. “Even such an oblique connection would have been considered inauspicious? It has been a common name taken by emperors throughout history.”

“For the name of one who would rule over the sects?” Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows with a wry smile.

Ah. Point well taken; whether the rule was by consensus or conquest, people would likely be hypersensitive to any negative implications, no matter how innocent or tenuous the

association might be.

But… it raised an interesting question. “Legend has it that the Chen dynasty was cursed by the vengeful spirit of Hou Jing. You have said that Wen Ruohan left no angry ghost… but might the surviving Wens have rallied enough to claim power again?” The Chen had certainly faced multiple challenges to their power by other ambitious generals.

Wei Wuxian hesitated. “Well. I won’t say it would have been *impossible*,” he said. “But it seems unlikely. After the losses they took… even thirty years later, I don’t think they would have recovered enough to be a threat. And the other sects would have stomped on any attempt they made. More likely, they were taken in quietly by a minor sect looking to grow.” He smiled cheekily. “And just because *Wen Ruohan* didn’t leave an angry ghost to cause trouble, that doesn’t mean there weren’t plenty of other ghosts about! So perhaps the legend is at least a little bit true.”

An interesting point. “If the sects were brought down, many cultivators would have died in the process,” Lan Wangji said quietly. “It seems possible that some… would have been strong enough to become powerful ghosts.”

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow. “Possibly,” he agreed. “But remember, the strength of a ghost has nothing to do with a golden core. A ghost’s strength comes from their rage and resentment when they died. Who’s to say our ghost was even a cultivator at all?” He smiled wryly. “But more likely, the ghost was just an excuse. Dynasties rise and fall, but no one likes to *admit* that! It’s much more comfortable to blame such things on gods and ghosts and demons – that way, no one has to be *responsible*.”

Lan Wangji pressed his lips together. Part of him wanted to argue that point… but Wei Wuxian was right. Ghosts and yao were real, but that didn’t mean *every* ghost story was true. Just that it was possible that they might be.

Shaking his head slightly, he resolutely turned his mind away from the distant past and turned the pages of the notebook until he found the start of the taijijian sketches. “Will you talk me through the modified stances?” he requested. “I would prefer to understand them before I make the attempt.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “All right. The starting changes are mostly because, if you are holding a sword you mean to *use*, you would definitely not hold it backwards and *behind* you…”

“This is it. This is what we needed.”

Nie Huaisang held his phone up to hide his face, biting back a smirk and covering it with a wide-eyed blink. Song Lan sounded positively *predatory*. “Are you sure? It’s not like a rich man having illegal artifacts in his art collection is going to *surprise* anyone.” He tilted his phone back and forth a little, letting his collection of charms swing. “I mean, I don’t know anything about these things, it just seems… a little thin?”

Song Lan continued carefully studying the collection of photos that the boys had sent them from Jin Ling’s phone, ignoring Nie Huaisang’s protestations of ignorance. Hmph. Xiao

Xingchen, on the other hand, looked up with a smile. “On its own, probably it wouldn’t be enough. Jin Guangshan has deep pockets and a great deal of influence. But we’ve had other leads connecting Jin Guangshan to the antiquities black market, we just never were able to find the evidence we needed to make the connection for sure. This is the link we needed.”

Nie Mingjue pursed his lips. “You sure you can get that to stick? Knowing Jin Guangshan, he’d just turn it around, express his deep regrets that his provider clearly didn’t vet his sources well enough, bought it in good faith, never realized, all that. He’ll lose a little face for being tricked, but he knows how to spin things.”

“Under normal circumstances, yes.” Song Lan’s eyes were intent. “But the Three Gorges Ring? He’s not wriggling out of that one. Not when the theft included a homicide.”

Nie Mingjue whistled quietly. “I’d forgotten about that. There was a big to-do when people found out that one of the gallery security guards was killed by the thieves.”

“Probably accidental,” Xiao Xingchen admitted. “It looks like they tried to take the guard down with a taser, but it struck too close to the heart. But it meant the theft was major news. Jin Guangshan even made a public statement on the matter.”

Nie Mingjue’s eyes narrowed. “Meaning, at a minimum, the man knew damn well he was receiving stolen goods when he acquired that ring. Or at least, any attempt to say he didn’t know is going to be a much harder sell.”

“Oh, we have more than that,” Song Lan said bluntly. “I’ve been checking the date stamps on Jin Ling’s photos. The earliest one is only three weeks after the theft. No sane thief is going to fence his loot on the market when the news is still hot. Which means he didn’t just *acquire* it. Minimum, it was given to him as a bribe of some kind… but it’s entirely possible he commissioned the theft in the first place.”

Nie Huaisang blinked. “I mean, I know we *think* he might have ties to Xue Yang and all that, but that seems an awful lot of trouble to go to, just for a bit of jewelry you wouldn’t even be able to show off properly in public!” Although apparently Jin Guangshan had been doing exactly that. Nie Huaisang supposed he could admire the chutzpah, at least.

Xiao Xingchen sighed. “That’s the part that makes this tricky – without a clear motive, making a case against him is much harder. Jin Ling’s testimony will help, but…”

“Aaah, no-no-no, you do not want the kid to testify!” Nie Huaisang said hastily. “Jin Guangshan would just spin that to make himself look like a victim: the doting grandfather, he made an innocent mistake and now he’s being turned on by his unfilial grandson after he generously took the boy in, youths these days only see money and don’t care about core family values, and the next thing you know he’ll have everyone busy tut-tutting over what is this world coming to, and the facts? What facts?”

Not to mention that Jin Ling didn’t deserve being put on the spot like that. Sure, the kid liked to play the big bad tough, but it was kind of painfully obvious that he was desperate for some kind of family connection, even when it meant being dragged out of school for family-friendly PR and then shuffled out of sight again when there weren’t any cameras for him to

dance for. Jin Ling definitely understood the score, and it was clear that he had no intention of helping his grandfather, but it wouldn't be reasonable or wise to rely on him any more than this.

Song Lan grimaced. "You have a point," he admitted. "Hanging our case on a schoolboy's testimony would be asking for trouble. And if we're talking spin doctoring – asking the kid to testify against his legal guardian could be turned around to smear the investigation." He rolled his eyes. "Politics."

Nie Huaisang shrugged. "You're more likely to get Jin Guangshan on corruption charges than anything criminal," he said pragmatically. "The party loves to show that they're hard on corruption, but criminal charges? I suspect more than a few will be eyeing the skeletons in their closet and thinking about awkward precedents."

He had to bite back another snicker at the sour faces all around him. Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan might be polite about it, but they were really *such* alpha males, narrowly focused on Smiting Evil with the power of Righteousness!

Personally, Nie Huaisang preferred the nibbled to death by ducks approach. After all, you could only smite an enemy once. But destroying their reputation and influence was the gift that just kept on giving! Literally, in this context – after all, while bringing Jin Guangshan to justice would be satisfying, convincing him to give up his criminal contacts would be much more productive in the long term.

Xiao Xingchen's phone vibrated. Sighing, he pulled it out and took a cursory glance at the screen – then hesitated. "It's from the task force; I should take it. If you'll excuse me for a moment?"

"What are the odds of linking Jin Guangshan to the kidnapping attempt?" Nie Mingjue asked, as Xiao Xingchen stepped politely out of the conference room.

Song Lan made a face. "Unless we get some kind of explicit confession from him or his lackeys? Not good. What we've got is circumstantial at best. Looking at Jin Ling's photos and the patterns we've seen on the black market, he definitely has been focused on artifacts from the Hubei region and Yiling Laozu's approximate time period, but he's hardly the only one, and it's a hell of a leap to go from that to kidnapping. If we can establish a link between him and Xue Yang, it'll make our case a lot stronger, but…"

"Even then, he can sell the whole thing as these dastardly criminals trying to drag their enemy down with them." Nie Mingjue huffed. "Hate to say it, but I think Huaisang is right. Jin Guangshan is too entrenched to take down with the force of the law alone. Only way we're going to nail him is if the party decides he's a liability and hangs him out to dry."

Who's this we*, Dage!* Nie Huaisang mentally protested, but his attention wasn't on the conversation. With Xiao Xingchen outside, he couldn't eavesdrop properly, but he could pick out the *tone* of the conversation. And that…

First polite deference, then sharp shock. Followed by carefully controlled anger and concern in equal measure.

Oh, that does not sound good.

Definitely not good, given the brisk tone of the sign-off – followed by a pregnant pause, as if Xiao Xingchen needed a moment to calm himself.

Or maybe he was bracing himself instead, given that he was wearing a grave expression as he opened the door that instantly made Song Lan abandon the conversation and turn a laser-sharp focus on his partner.

Xiao Xingchen sighed. "There's no good way to say this. At some point last night, Xue Yang escaped custody."

"What." Song Lan's tone was dangerously flat.

"They're not certain how or when," Xiao Xingchen admitted. "There was a decoy in his place to keep his absence from being noticed immediately, but… the person he used is in no position to communicate at the moment."

Nie Huaisang was opening his mouth to comment on the likelihood of that, and then abruptly remembered what A'Qing's ghost had looked like. Right.

Nie Mingjue was already on his feet, radio in hand. "Do you think he's coming here?" he asked, voice tight.

"Given this is where he was caught, I don't think we can afford to assume he won't," Song Lan said flatly. "Get the word out to your people and the project members. We'll work on tracking him down. With luck, we'll catch up to him before he causes more problems… but I'm not inclined to trust luck at this point."

Wen Yuan glanced back at the path they'd just left, then at the shadowy shapes of the buildings that made up the historic complex, dark against the deepening dusk. "Um. Are we *sure* this is a good idea?" he asked uneasily.

"Of course it is!" Jin Ling bristled. "Meng Yao wouldn't have asked us to meet him in person if it weren't, he's the one who told me about the campus being on lockdown in the first place!"

He sounded confident, right until one of the old trees in the garden they were walking past rustled in the evening breeze and Jin Ling almost jumped out of his skin.

"*After* Nie Mingjue had already told Professor Lan and Wei-laoshi, and they told us," Lan Jingyi huffed, dragging along a few steps behind them but eyeing their surroundings just as nervously. "Seriously, *why* can't we just meet him in the Jingshi, anyway? We already talked about everything last night anyway! I wanna sleep!"

"Like you didn't nap half the day away this afternoon!"

"You're the one who was snoring when I got up!"

“He has a point,” Wen Yuan interceded before they got sidetracked. “I know Meng Yao said he couldn’t talk over the phone this time for security reasons, but after tonight, we need to meet in the Jingshi. You heard Professor Lan. Xue Yang is *dangerous*. It’s not safe to be out alone.” He eyed the shadows, wishing now that they’d asked Wei Wuxian to come along. It hadn’t seemed important at the time, not when they were only going to the meditation gardens in the historic complex, especially because Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had been deep in some research project and they hadn’t wanted to interrupt. Meng Yao had promised that what he needed would only take a few minutes, so they should be back before it actually got dark, anyway. But…

“D’you think Meng Yao thinks there’s a connection between what happened with Xuanyu and Xue Yang being on the loose?” Lan Jingyi asked uneasily.

Jin Ling shivered. “…maybe? He did say it was urgent when we asked if he still wanted to meet.”

“Even so,” Wen Yuan pressed.

Jin Ling’s expression turned mulish, and for a moment Wen Yuan thought his friend was going to argue, if for no other reason than because he was weirdly defensive about Meng Yao. Then Jin Ling’s eyes darted around the shadows of the buildings again. “…okay, fine, whatever.” he said hastily, the words practically tripping over each other.

Wen Yuan hesitated. That was an odd reaction. “What’s wrong?”

Jin Ling jumped. “What? Nothing’s wrong! It’s just dark!”

“I dunno,” Lan Jingyi said slowly. “It’s not just me, is it? Because I could swear this place wasn’t *half* so spooky the last time we were here in the evening.”

Wen Yuan hesitated. Because Lan Jingyi was right. The complex had always been a little creepy to walk through at night, sure. But now every shadow seemed to hide a lurking monster, every slight echo or rustle of sound was something *right behind* him—

And once he would have blamed that on an overactive imagination; it wasn’t like there was a shortage of reasons to be jumpy. But given what he knew now?

Swallowing, he reached into his pocket, feeling the wad of folded up paper inside. Then he drew in a deep breath and braced himself, stopping just before the point where the path through the building opened onto the meditation gardens, and said, in a quiet voice that wouldn’t carry, “Is someone there?”

Jin Ling scowled. “What the heck are you even…”

Taptaptap!

That came from right in front of them, despite the fact that *no one was there*. And… there was something familiar about the sound…

Wait. That was a cane. Like the kind that a blind person uses. "A'Qing?" Wen Yuan blurted. "Why are you…"

Then she was *there*, acid burns livid around ruined eyes and mouth stretched impossibly wide in a silent scream, the mangled remains of her tongue on full display as she lunged out of nowhere at them, hands reaching furiously as if to grab – or *push*—

Vanished.

"*Yrk*!" With a strangled shriek, Lan Jingyi latched onto Wen Yuan like a terrified koala, nearly sending both of them crashing down onto the pavement in his panic.

Jin Ling had paled so much that his face almost glowed in the darkness. "What was *that*?!"

Heart hammering, Wen Yuan grabbed both of them and forcibly turned them around. "We're going back. *Now*."

"Back?" Jin Ling yelped. "We just got here…!"

"Yes, and something's *wrong*," Wen Yuan said tightly—

He saw it out of the corner of his eye, a hint of moonlight on dull metal, too long and straight, leading to a shadow that didn't *fit* the wood and tiles of the structures in the historic complex.

A helicopter?

No no no, this is bad, that was A'Qing, she was murdered, her primary anchor in the world is —

Something round and hard pressed against the back of Wen Yuan's head, and he froze.

—Xue Yang.

Except… it wasn't Xue Yang's voice that spoke. Because it was a voice he knew.

"Sorry, boys. But I'm afraid I can't have you leave just yet."

"*I need you to meet me at the historic compound right away, Professor. Bring Wei Wuxian as well. It's about the boys.*"

Coming up to the end of the path, Lan Wangji froze.

Meng Yao was waiting for them, a pleasant smile on his face… and the muzzle of a handgun pressed against Jin Ling's temple.

Lan Wangji's breath caught and he almost lunged at the man. Wei Wuxian's hand on his shoulder barely caught him in time.

“Well. This is an interesting situation,” Wei Wuxian said, his tone almost conversational. “What do you intend, Master Yao?”

“You’re not a fool, Master Wei,” Meng Yao countered pleasantly. “I imagine my intent is not hard to guess.”

“Where are the other boys?” Lan Wangji demanded, voice tight.

“They’re safe with my colleagues – assuming, of course, you don’t try anything foolish.” Meng Yao shrugged, the gun never wavering. Jin Ling was silent, eyes wide in a pale face. “I would prefer we do this with no unnecessary violence… but the decision is, of course, yours.”

OMAKE:

“I would prefer we do this with no unnecessary violence,” says Meng Yao aka Jin “Murder is Always an Option” Guangyao…

LEXICON:

Taijijian (*tàijíjiàn*, 太极剑): “Sword tai chi.”

NOTES:

I did warn you that I’m me and therefore there were going to be some action elements in this…

And now I can stop whistling every time someone posts a comment furiously speculating about Meng Yao. Whew. I was starting to run out of tunes!

Although I have to admit that I’ve been a bit bemused by that. To be honest, when I wrote this I thought that his scene back in chapter 20 was pretty much a dead giveaway, especially when he went, “Don’t worry, you can tell me your secrets, and oh by the way let me tell you about your friend’s very personal secret that could get him into serious legal hot water if word gets out about it.” But apparently more than a few people ended up trusting him *more* after that scene!

Which… I honestly found kind of cool? Intellectually I’m familiar with the curse of knowledge bias – the fact that we reflexively assume that people have the same knowledge base that we do. (I have the “and quartz, of course” cartoon on the wall in my office at work,

since it's something that I need to bear in mind at my job!) It's also one of the really tricky parts of writing – it's hard to gauge what is and isn't obvious, when you know in advance what the clues are pointing towards. (See: all the people saying that of *course* Lan Wangji is just so obvious about being in love with Wei Wuxian in the backstory…) But it's been fascinating to watch that play out in real time, as people seem to skip over bits of foreshadowing that I'd thought were too obvious! You don't often get to *see* how your own cognitive bias affects your perceptions.

(Also it means that I did in fact accomplish my goal of keeping his role ambiguous!)

Though, in my defense, a lot of the people who took that scene as evidence that Meng Yao would turn out to be a good guy also admitted to *wanting* him to be a good guy. So yes, curse of knowledge on my part, but also motivated reasoning at play!

And yes, it really is called the curse of knowledge bias. Which I find awesome.

Also, yes, the boys going out alone at night was not a smart move. Bear in mind that in canon, these are the kids who forgot to restock emergency flares, decided to wander off tracking down whoever was leaving dead cats in their food, and apparently were night hunting without carrying an antidote for corpse poisoning…

Regarding "Wen": the character for the Wen clan is 温 (wēn), meaning (amusingly) "lukewarm." While there are indeed multiple emperors with the name Wen circa the era I'm using to approximate the Sunshot Campaign and its aftermath, all the ones that I've looked up the characters for used 文 (wén), which means literature and culture – basically, "sophisticated." But since I'm usually reading and writing in English, the distinction is not self-evident, so I just had to do a hat-tip!

And before anyone gets too excited, the Northern Wei were an actual historical dynasty. Actually, there were *multiple* dynasties named "Wei" – and, yes, it's the same character as Wei Wuxian's surname. Not all of them were founded or ruled by people *named* Wei, since there was a tendency to recycle dynasty names – especially for dynasties ruled by nomad cultures like the Tuoba, as was the case of the Wei dynasties in the disunified period. Given the whole "son of a servant" thing, it's highly unlikely that Wei Wuxian would have had any connection to those – although if you wanted to go that direction, you could have an explanation for him having grey eyes (which was a fanart convention well before the donghua was produced, or so I've read), since he would not necessarily be ethnically Han. Especially since it was apparently popular for powerful people with non-Han heritage to claim the names of old dynasties as surnames during certain periods!

(For the curious, Wei Wuxian's name 魏 (wèi) is a term for a tower over a palace gateway. Although his name may be based on Wei Wuji, a historical general from the Warring States period, at least according to some theories – https://rynne.tumblr.com/post/719816888626118656/the-real-life-wei-wuxian-and-jiang-cheng-a-tale.)

Also, just a fun little language note: one of the things I find myself doing on the edit passes before posting for these last couple chapters is making sure Wei Wuxian uses contractions

when he should… because not using contractions is an easy way to give a character a slightly stilted speech pattern. And apparently, after two hundred thousand words of him speaking as a language learner, I was having more trouble than I realized getting his character voice back to a natural cadence when I wrote the first draft!

Speaking of which… Wei Wuxian typing notes on the phone is partially a nod to his interest in new things… but mostly it's a little hat-tip to the fact that I wrote probably 99% of the first draft of this fic on my phone while out walking. (The remaining 1% generally was when I ended the day just a sentence or two short of a scene ending or finishing a thought and decided to wrap it up before transferring the text to the actual document file.)

Su Song is listed as one of the top three great inventors of China. He lived in the Song Dynasty, a period in Chinese history of massive technological and intellectual innovation. (No connection to Su Minshan beyond irony!)

A fun aside: when Wei Wuxian says "would you believe me if I said I found a secret manual hidden in a cave" regarding his new cultivation method, MXTX is in fact lampshading the fact that that's *exactly* how it would happen according to the usual tropes of the genre! Seriously, even just reading the summaries of classic wuxia and xianxia… I don't recommend making a drinking game of how many Secret Techniques are scribbled on walls!

I've already touched on the fact that I find the whole "no one gets in *or out* without a token" aspect of the Lan wards very sketchy. Yes, it's mostly a plot device to keep Wei Wuxian from just going over the walls and gone the minute Lan Wangji looks the other way, but it still means that you're effectively trapped inside with no way out under your own power if you don't have a token. That said, while writing the conversation about the wards, I was struck with the silly mental image of the Lan retaking Cloud Recesses… and then realizing that they can't get back in, because they lost the tokens over the course of the war and no one knows how to make new ones, so they've accidentally locked themselves out! (Yes, I know, the Lan were never actually driven out of Gusu. I did say the idea was silly.)

I really wanted Wen Ning to get more of a role in the story… but ultimately the plot didn't shake out that way. Plus, frankly, my cast was already pushing the limits for the number of important characters I could juggle. (Which is also why Ouyang Zizhen got relegated to a bit role, despite being an awesome character I really would have liked to do more with.)

An interesting character dynamic: while Wen Qing canonically describes Wen Ning as timid and mousy, the fact of the matter is that he has a couple Stone-Cold Badass moments well before the whole Ghost General business. It's actually something that MXTX does very well in her writing – the disconnect between what someone thinks they know about someone, and who that person actually *is*.

We're told in canon that gentry received soul-calming ceremonies when young – Wei Wuxian uses the fact that he *didn't* get those ceremonies to terrify Wen Chao out of torturing him to death. (Or more accurately, taunts him to try it.) But my sense has always been that those ceremonies simply make it *less likely* that you'll rise as a fierce ghost, not impossible. After all, one presumes Wen Ning and Nie Mingjue both had them.

And yes, in this fic Bichen is Lan Yi's legacy sword. Look, I had to get it into Lan Wangji's hands *somehow*, and it's not like they'd be able to make a new one!

And for the curious, one of the interesting things about archaeological preservation is that you want *stable* conditions, and generally extremes. A hot desert? Great conditions. A frozen wasteland? Great conditions. Total submersion? Excellent. *What* is best preserved will vary, but the one thing that is guaranteed to destroy almost everything is *variability*.

"Jiang Cheng was never ambitious." The interesting thing is, he really isn't. He's *insecure*, which is not the same thing at all. In a very real sense, he's too busy proving himself to himself to think about building himself up to become *more*.

Chapter 23: Remnant

Chapter Summary

> “Oh. So that’s where it went.”

Chapter Notes

> Content warning for heights and falling: there is a scene involving freefall from a significant height here, and one (antagonist) character doesn’t survive it. Also warning for canon-level gore and violence, because we're headed into the action/adventure part here!

Panic will not help us, Lan Wangji thought grimly.

It was true. But the thought did nothing to prevent the wrenching jolt in his stomach that had nothing to do with the inertia of the helicopter lifting off the ground. He was acutely aware that their odds of getting out of this situation had just fallen significantly.

Not that they’d had any opportunity to avoid it. With the boys threatened in two locations, there’d been no way they could incapacitate Meng Yao and still get to Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi before they were hurt, so they’d had no choice but to cooperate. And Meng Yao and his allies were taking no chances, particularly with Wei Wuxian. Before going anywhere, Meng Yao had blindfolded both of them, and zip-tied their hands behind their backs. Once they’d been pushed into the helicopter, Wei Wuxian had been seated at the far end of the cabin from the other captives, with Meng Yao and one of his allies standing close guard, although they had taken off Lan Wangji’s blindfold once he’d been strapped into the seat.

He refused to be grateful. They certainly hadn’t done it for his benefit.

“Why the hell are we bothering with this? Just tranq them and be done with it!”

Lan Wangji narrowed his eyes and allowed himself a moment of mean satisfaction when Su Minshan flinched.

Meng Yao sighed. “We’ve been over this before,” he said, in the tone of someone who’d been sitting through far too many meetings with people who simply would not listen to sense. “Tranquilizer doses need to be precisely calculated, and we don’t have updated numbers.” He shrugged. “And Doctor Wen confirmed that Wei Wuxian is able to purge chemical

influences. I don't know if Professor Lan or A'Yuan are at that stage yet, but it would be foolish to assume that they can't."

All of which he knew, because he'd been part of their discussions after the first attempt. *Damn him*.

Meng Yao smiled. "So if they're going to be awake, we might as well let them talk, don't you think? After all, this is going to be a long trip."

Translation: if Wei Wuxian was going to be alert and awake, then allowing the captives to all be awake and able to talk would make threatening one of the others to force his compliance much easier. Which was why they'd taken Lan Wangji's blindfold off. They *wanted* him to see what was going on, so that he could verify everything that was happening for Wei Wuxian.

It also meant that they had no intentions of letting him go once they had what they wanted, given that now he could identify all of them. Not that he'd ever thought they would.

Su Minshan made a face, but interestingly he didn't argue. Instead, he looked at the boxes strapped into the cabin. "Are you sure we got enough?" he asked. "I thought…"

"We're on a time limit," Meng Yao explained. "So long as we were on the ground, the mission was at risk. Spending time looking for old robes and laptops wasn't feasible." He patted the compartment where they'd locked away Suibian, Wei Wuxian's flute, and Lan Wangji's computer, as well as the artifact crate holding Bichen. "We have the most important artifacts. Our patron will understand."

Lan Wangji remained silent. From what he could see, Meng Yao and Su Minshan had taken the computer from his office, but they'd left any hard copy behind, and they'd only grabbed the swords and anything that looked like it might be cultivation-related at a glance. He was inclined to take that as a small blessing; it at least meant that there was nothing irreplaceable they might have to leave behind if they found an opportunity to escape, except for the swords.

Su Minshan frowned. "Still…"

"Hey, we got the goods he wanted. But if you want to go back and grab some more? Have fun!" A taunting rap on the cabin wall. "Might be a bit of a jump at this point, though."

And that, Lan Wangji acknowledged bleakly, was why he had no immediate plans to resist. Because Xue Yang was sitting right next to the three boys, and they already knew he had no qualms about harming children.

Jin Ling was staring at Meng Yao, eyes wide and betrayed. "Why are you doing this?" he demanded. Or rather, tried to demand. But the words seemed to waver in his throat, more plaintive than angry.

Meng Yao shook his head, as if *disappointed*, of all things. "Jin Ling, we talked about this. As far as Jin Guangshan cares, flesh and blood don't matter, unless you're useful to him. I

have to prove I'm worth it, if I want him to acknowledge me."

Lan Wangji stiffened. Had Meng Yao just implied… "You are related to Jin Guangshan?" he demanded, breaking his furious silence with another kind of fury. Because how had Nie Mingjue missed such an obvious security risk?!

Jin Ling twisted in his seat to stare at Lan Wangji, then turned an even more betrayed look on Meng Yao again. "You said that you'd told the project!"

Meng Yao looked hurt. "Of course I did! Lan Xichen knew all about it. I trusted his discretion – after all, I could have gotten into a lot of trouble legally for telling anyone."

Of course. Lan Wangji pressed his lips together, fighting the urge to curse. Because he could see the shape of what had happened now. If he understood the implications of what Meng Yao had said correctly, then like Mo Xuanyu, he was an illegitimate son of Jin Guangshan – and thus it made sense that the background check might have missed that detail. Especially since Jin Guangshan had not become a security concern until later… and by then, Lan Xichen was no longer actively engaged in the project.

More than that. Lan Wangji remembered his brother describing how he'd met Meng Yao, when his brother had attempted to intercede in a fight between students on campus that had turned ugly. Meng Yao had broken the fight up and made a point of staying with a shaken Lan Xichen afterwards. They had been friends ever since. Lan Xichen *liked* Meng Yao, and so it would never have occurred to him to mention something the man told him in confidence, because the very idea that Meng Yao might *not* be trustworthy would never have crossed his mind.

"You came to the campus as Jin Guangshan's agent," he said flatly.

Meng Yao gave him a wounded look. "An *agent*? Of course not! I joined because Nie Mingjue offered me a position, and I have always acted in the best interests of the project. But it's only natural that Jin Guangshan would want to remain informed about such a volatile situation. I simply offered to monitor the situation for him."

Lan Wangji let his flat stare speak for him. Because now that he knew to look, the extent of Meng Yao's meddling was obvious.

Su Minshan's mysterious acquisition of lethal ammunition. Ammunition that he couldn't have acquired through normal channels… except that *Meng Yao* was the one who handled most of the administrative side of the security system. Including supplies. He could have handed the necessary forms to Nie Mingjue to sign, and the man probably wouldn't have even noticed, trusting his deputy to have checked them.

Meng Yao had been the one who had "been pressured" to let Jin Zixun into the lab… and the one who had "discovered" the break-in the next morning, a break-in that would have required detailed knowledge of the building's layout and security. He'd been the one to pull and secure the security video of Wei Wuxian's awakening. He'd delivered Su Minshan to the Caiyi police, and headed the investigation into the man's disappearance.

He'd been the one to suggest bringing Wen Yuan's friends to Cloud Recesses. Supposedly to protect them. And in the process, given himself access to enough hostages to circumvent Wei Wuxian's abilities.

Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi were both silent, listening with striken faces and wide eyes, plainly unwilling to risk tipping the precarious balance of the situation.

Jin Ling was too distraught for caution. "And you're *still* going to help him? Even after what he did to Xuanyu?"

Meng Yao sighed. "It *is* a shame. But surely you understand that Xuanyu brought that upon himself? All he had to do was show he was willing to be a good son, and he would have been fine."

"And you *used* it," Jin Ling said, voice suddenly soft and bitter. "Just like you used me. To get us to trust you."

Meng Yao shook his head, looking put-upon. "Jin Ling, you're being a child. Yes, I may have taken advantage of the opportunity you gave me. But surely you understand that it's not like I have much choice in the matter? If I don't cooperate, he'll simply do to me what he did to Xuanyu. And this way, no one was hurt. It really is all for the best."

Lan Wangji's eyes narrowed. *No one was hurt.* As if betrayal on multiple levels, manipulation, and holding a gun to a child's head didn't even count.

Unexpectedly, Wei Wuxian chuckled. "Well! That does explain a few things," he said, sounding as casual as if they were sitting in the garden, rather than bound prisoners being flown to an unknown destination. "Nie Huaisang did say that the timing of the first attack was suspiciously good for us. I assume that was your doing?"

Meng Yao looked at the man. "You make it sound like I set them up to fail," he said, although to Lan Wangji's ears he sounded more amused than anything else. "Why would I do that?"

"To prove that you are *necessary*, of course!" Wei Wuxian said, his grin wryly knowing even with his eyes covered. "If they tried without you and failed, well, that would show Jin Guangshan that he needs you, and that means you have a better chance to make him give you what you want."

Lan Wangji did not hold his breath; he dared not give anything away. He'd initially hoped to draw their captors' attention away from Wei Wuxian in the hopes of giving him an opportunity to act, but if they could cause some division in the ranks, even a little…

Unfortunately, Xue Yang only snickered. "Low, Meng Yao, very low," he said, with an exaggerated pout. Then he smirked. "On the other hand, I got to see actual cultivation in action. How cool was that?"

"If you consider being knocked out before you knew what happened *seeing*," Wei Wuxian countered tauntingly.

Xue Yang's grin was disturbingly playful. "Hey, I'm always game for a rematch," he said, flipping a knife in the air. Then his face positively lit up. "Or, hey, I hear you're taking students! I'm down for that. How about it?"

Wei Wuxian tilted his head. "That depends. What are you offering?"

Meng Yao cleared his throat. "*Absolutely nothing*. Correct?" He eyed Xue Yang pointedly.

The hitman made a face. "Killjoy," he grumbled, crossing his arms and sliding sulkily down into his seat.

"Sparing myself a stress-induced ulcer," Meng Yao countered dryly, before looking at Wei Wuxian. "That was not the least bit subtle," he chided.

Wei Wuxian smirked. "I'll bear that in mind for when I'm trying to be," he said.

Something rattled in the ceiling, an unsettling counterpoint to the throbbing hum of the helicopter's engine, and Su Minshan jumped. "Are we sure this thing is up to spec?"

"It was requisitioned out of a military hangar, so yes," Meng Yao said reassuringly. "The pilot is very experienced; he would alert us if anything were wrong."

Xue Yang cackled. "Maybe it's a *ghost*!" he said gleefully. "I'm sure you have a few, Meng Yao."

Meng Yao smiled placidly. "Surely not as many as you," he demurred, not even attempting to deny it.

Which was disturbing – but Lan Wangji was too distracted by a sudden flash of hope to focus on it.

Because Xue Yang was *here*… which meant they might have help after all.

Granted, A'Qing's ability to help would be limited. She was bound to Xue Yang, her murderer, and her ability to act upon the physical world was limited. That was why she'd been unable to warn them of Meng Yao's plot; by the time Wei Wuxian had been close enough for her to contact him, it was already too late.

Except that Wei Wuxian's guidao was based on working with and *empowering* the dead…

And, barely audible, blending with the beating thrum of the helicopter – Wei Wuxian was humming.

Nie Mingjue had not survived his career in the military by ignoring his hindbrain when it started screaming. So when he opened his eyes in the middle of the night to a gut-deep certainty that *something was wrong*, he paid attention.

A sideways flicker of his eyes to the sullen ember-glow of his low-light clock display confirmed that it was less than an hour since he'd gone to bed. Which further confirmed his

sense that something wasn't right; he hadn't slept long enough to have woken up by chance.

He'd deliberately arranged his room so that he could see everything in it quickly – he'd survived a few too many prank wars to break that habit yet. Which meant that quick flicker of a glance was enough to confirm that no one had come into his room as he slept.

Frowning, he tossed his sheet aside and sat up.

As head of security, his apartment was on campus so that he could respond quickly in the case of an emergency; the trip from Caiyi to Cloud Recesses was too long for anything like a reasonable response time. Normally he would only be called off-shift for a serious emergency, but with Xue Yang at large, he'd told his people to alert him if anything struck them as suspicious. But his radio was silent, there were no messages on his phone, and when he stepped outside to do a brief check of the immediate area, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Shaking his head, he went back to his apartment. This time, he turned the light on; he'd left it off to preserve his night vision while he checked, but given that the looming sense of *wrong* hadn't faded, there was no point in pretending that he would be going back to sleep anytime soon. At the very least, he should check in with Meng Yao, who was managing the evening watch—

As he reached for his radio, the light flipped off. Then on again.

Nie Mingjue froze.

He hadn't followed much of the work that the others had been doing on cultivation, beyond figuring out how to incorporate Wei Wuxian's abilities into the security plan. Not out of a lack of interest, the possibilities were *amazing*, but by all accounts cultivating was a full-time job, especially in the early stages, and he plain did not have the time to devote to it. But he had seen something like this before.

"A'Qing?" he murmured, careful not to raise his voice. He hadn't thought much about the ghost girl, beyond a vague assumption that with Xue Yang in custody and having gotten closure with Xiao Xingchen, she had probably passed on. But…

Taptaptap.

Well, that was a pretty definitive answer to that question. Now, what was he supposed to do about it?

Nie Mingjue sighed and reached for his phone. He hated to wake Lan Wangji up, but Wei Wuxian didn't have a phone yet. He knew the cultivator would still be awake; maybe he'd be lucky and Wei Wuxian would be close enough to answer Lan Wangji's phone himself…

Phone in hand, Nie Mingjue hesitated, stomach sinking. Because Wei Wuxian should be up and about… so why was A'Qing wasting time coming to *him*?

The phone suddenly started ringing in his hand. Looking down, he somehow wasn't at all surprised to see Xiao Xingchen's ID.

"Xiao Xingchen," he greeted, hitting the speaker with one hand while the other snatched his security officer's jacket off the back of his chair with the other. "I assume A'Qing has been trying to get your attention, too?"

Xiao Xingchen didn't respond for a half-second, probably startled by Nie Mingjue anticipating his message. "Yes," he said, the sound quality a little tinny as Nie Mingjue set the phone on his desk in order to shrug the jacket on. The black pajama bottoms and tank top he was wearing would pass for proper clothes in the dark, which was why he slept in them. "I tried to call the Jingshi, but everyone's phones are going straight to voicemail. I don't want to worry you, but…"

"Xue Yang's ghostly stalker is raising hell with people who *aren't* the guy who can actually talk to ghosts," Nie Mingjue said grimly, shoving his feet into his boots. "Consider me worried." Pulling his laces snug, he said, "I'm going to check on the Jingshi now. Meet me there."

Ending the call, he grabbed his radio and strode out the door, already trying to raise Meng Yao for a report.

Meng Yao wasn't answering. And when he reached the Jingshi, *no one* was there.

What was there, unfortunately, told a fairly clear story.

"Lan Wangji, at least, left in a hurry," Xiao Xingchen said, nodding to the tea gone cold on the table. He and Song Lan had been staying on campus; they had gotten to the Jingshi almost as fast as Nie Mingjue. "I would guess Wei Wuxian was with him."

"Doesn't look like the kids did," Song Lan noted. "Their outdoor shoes are missing, and the slippers are pretty neatly lined up; I'd say they went somewhere before the adults left." He grimaced. "Professor Lan's laptop is missing, though – and whoever took it made a mess of his office."

Meaning the most likely scenario was that the kids had gone off on their own – why? – and the adults had gone after them, and sometime after that someone had broken in. "Anything else missing?"

"Nothing obvious. Looks like someone tried to get into Wei Wuxian's chest in the master bedroom, but they couldn't get it open." Song Lan's lips were tight. Nie Mingjue didn't blame him. This was looking very bad.

"They wouldn't have taken off like that without some reason," Nie Mingjue said. "So why didn't they contact us first? I know Wei Wuxian is still getting used to the idea of phones, but Lan Wangji wouldn't just forget." Although – the man was definitely far more impulsive than anyone would believe just by looking at him. He very well might forget, in the heat of the moment.

“Maybe they did,” Song Lan pointed out. “Meng Yao was on the evening shift, wasn’t he? Lan Wangji would have reached out to him first.”

“Has there been any contact from him?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

“Nothing.” Nie Mingjue glowered at his radio. He’d checked in with everyone else on night duty. All of them had confirmed that they’d noticed nothing out of the ordinary, and Meng Yao had been doing the standard regular check-ins. Including one right before A’Qing had started dragging people out of bed. So where the hell was the man?

“We may have an answer for that,” an unexpected voice said crisply.

Nie Mingjue blinked, stepping out the front door. “Doctor Wen. And… Wen Ning? What are you doing here?”

Wen Ning ducked his head, looking for all the world like he was trying to hide behind his sister.

Wen Qing simply raised her eyebrows, the picture of brisk dignity despite wearing what were clearly evening lounging clothes as Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen joined Nie Mingjue at the door. “I suspect we’re here for the same reason you are – an insistent ghost and no response from Wei Wuxian or Lan Wangji. But…”

To Nie Mingjue’s surprise, her brother was the one to continue. “Um… I was out a little while ago, looking for owls.” He held up a camera, equipped with an absolutely massive lens that Nie Mingjue vaguely thought might be part of a night photography setup.

Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan both stiffened. “You saw something,” Song Lan said, eyes intent.

“I… think I did?” Wen Ning swallowed, but to Nie Mingjue’s surprise, he held his ground. “There’s been a helicopter doing night fly-bys for a few days now – or maybe several, I usually just *heard* them rather than seeing them, and I don’t know that sort of thing well enough to tell them apart just by how they sound…” He visibly caught himself with a little shake, cutting off the flow of nervous mumbling. “I saw the helicopter tonight,” he said firmly. “Up in this area. And it was *very low*, and the way it was moving… I think it had just taken off.” Stepping forward, he held out the camera, the preview screen already showing a picture.

Nie Mingjue accepted it grimly, already kicking himself. All the furor over flying swords, and he’d completely overlooked the fact that modern technology had its own answers to getting people around in the skies.

Huh. Damn good shot, especially given Wen Ning must have snapped it on the fly.

He just wished what it showed wasn’t so chilling.

“That’s not the media. That’s a military helicopter,” he said darkly. Worse, going by the angle… Wen Ning was right. He’d caught it just after liftoff. “There’s no way it was here on

legitimate military business, though. Dammit, how did Meng Yao miss that thing…"

Wen Ning and Wen Qing glanced at each other.

Great. So there was still more bad news coming. Nie Mingjue closed his eyes for a moment, then cast a quick glance at the two detectives, who nodded: his people, his lead.

He looked at the Wen siblings. "Hit me with it," he said, resigned.

"I… after I saw the helicopter, I contacted Meng Yao, since he was in charge of the evening shift," Wen Ning said, nervously holding up his radio.

Nie Mingjue nodded slowly. He'd given Wen Ning the radio, since the photographer was often out and about at odd hours and in odd places and had an eye for things that were out of place. With security as strained as it was, he could use all the extra eyes he could get. "And?"

"He… he said not to worry about it," Wen Ning said. "Except… I could hear it in the background. A lot closer. Almost like… he might have been inside it."

Well.

Hell.

"It gets worse," Wen Qing said grimly. "Wen Yuan told me that Meng Yao had been talking to them about Mo Xuanyu's situation. He said you'd asked him to do a risk assessment and he needed their input."

Nie Mingjue blinked. "I asked him to look into Xuanyu's electronic security, yeah," he said, mostly on autopilot. "But the kids wouldn't be much help with that…"

Wen Qing held up her phone. "When A'Qing woke us up, I noticed I had a text from Wen Yuan, saying that Meng Yao asked them to meet him this evening. In person."

The implications sank in and he bit back the urge to swear. "And Wen Yuan *knows* that I ask Meng Yao to handle the sensitive stuff…"

"They wouldn't have had any reason to consider it suspicious," Xiao Xingchen agreed. "Although his timing was risky, making a move when we were on alert thanks to Xue Yang's escape."

"He was probably on a restricted timeline," Song Lan said. "And Xue Yang's escape likely made his claim of needing information from the boys more believable."

Nie Mingjue gritted his teeth. "Hell. He told us *himself* that we had a mole!" And Nie Mingjue had been the one to task *Meng Yao* with tracking down the source of the leaks… which in hindsight was probably why Meng Yao had brought it up in the first place. Because *of course* Nie Mingjue would hand that off to his trusted deputy…!

Wen Qing huffed. "Well. What's done is done," she said, eyes as sharp as surgical steel. "Now we need triage: what can we do *now*?"

“We can call on the task force,” Xiao Xingchen said immediately. “Xue Yang’s previous involvement is enough for this to fall into our jurisdiction.” He sighed. “But given that they’re already in the air…”

Nie Mingjue grimaced, shoving the betrayal and fury aside. Time enough for that later – preferably with his hands on Meng Yao’s *throat*. Right now they had a more immediate problem to deal with. The odds of intercepting the helicopter were slim – and almost impossible to do without endangering the kidnapped people.

“We do at least have a source of information,” Wen Qing pointed out. “At a minimum, A’Qing may be able to tell us where they are, even if it takes playing Hot and Cold with a map.”

Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen both looked grim. Nie Mingjue had to agree. Knowing where their people were might help… but only if they could actually catch them in transit. Once they’d reached a secured location, getting them out again would be one hell of a gamble… and he didn’t like the odds of convincing a strike force to go in on the say-so of a ghost, not against someone who had managed to get hands on a military helicopter in the first place.

“Hate to say it, but at this point I think our best hope is for Wei Wuxian to pull another rabbit out of his hat,” he admitted unhappily. Except, of course, by now Meng Yao knew something of what Wei Wuxian was capable of. He’d be watching the man like a hawk, and had four hostages to ensure cooperation.

“Is there any way A’Qing might be able to help them?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

That was some very *frustrated* tapping.

“Um… actually, I had a thought?” Wen Ning looked in the vague direction of the tapping. “I don’t know anything about real ghosts, Miss A’Qing… but you can move things, at least a little bit, right? It’s just, in the movies, sometimes ghosts can teleport small things…”

For a moment there was no response, almost as if the ghost girl had been startled. Then…

Ting!

All of them jumped when a single jiao coin dropped out of nowhere onto the flagstones.

Blinking, Nie Mingjue reached down and picked it up. It was strangely cold to the touch, cold enough to sting a little bit – but it was absolutely real.

“I’m going to take that as a yes,” he said, and turned the coin over in his fingers. “But… I’m going to guess, nothing particularly large or heavy.” He looked around. “Okay, people, brainstorm time. What have we got in this size range that could actually be useful for our people?”

“Lock picks, maybe,” Song Lan said slowly. “Although they wouldn’t do much good unless someone knew how to use them – and Xue Yang was carrying zip ties the first time.”

Point. “Lighter?” Nie Mingjue suggested. Although he suspected that wouldn’t be much more help; a flame would be too easy to notice.

Something rattled in the kitchen. Following the sound, they found Lan Wangji’s cooking knives rattling in their block.

“Something that cuts?” Nie Mingjue guessed, and heard a sharp tap that sounded like affirmation. “Huh. Not sure where we could find something small enough…”

“A surgical scalpel might work,” Wen Qing said. “But getting one could be difficult.” She frowned. “And the handles are usually fairly heavy.”

“Oh!” Wen Ning yanked the pack of photography gear off his back and began rummaging through it with the confidence of a man who’d packed his gear many, many times. “I think I have… ah!”

He came up holding… a retractable box cutter. The type with disposable, *breakaway razor blades*.

Snapping off a fresh blade, he held it out on an open palm. “Would this work, Miss?” he asked their invisible companion.

The blade vanished – and Nie Mingjue felt like their surroundings had subtly warmed at the same moment.

Wen Ning blinked, eyes wide. “*Wow*,” he breathed, and Nie Mingjue almost had to laugh.

“Better get more ready,” he suggested. “If they’re cutting zip ties, those things are going to go dull pretty fast.” He looked at the others. “The rest of us should start making calls. And we might want to find someone who can talk amateurs through landing that helicopter.”

Because he had a pretty good sense of the caliber of that bunch. If they could get themselves freed to move…

Then Meng Yao was going to have cause to regret quite a few life choices.

Well. This could get a little complicated.

With his eyes covered, Wei Wuxian had to rely largely on his sense of hearing for any information about what was happening around him. Which was not helped by the growling sound he’d learned to associate with engines, or the rapid *thrmthrmthrm* that he couldn’t even begin to place. Lan Wangji had said something about a “helicopter” when the noise had started, and it had definitely been for Wei Wuxian’s benefit, since the man had been locked in furious silence before that. Unfortunately, they hadn’t exactly spent a lot of time discussing modern transportation beyond the everyday, so even if he had a name for it, that didn’t exactly tell him very much!

But Wei Wuxian was acutely familiar with the feeling of going up into the air. Which meant he didn’t exactly need to know the specifics to realize that escaping this was going to be

tricky.

The boys were being very quiet – fear, uncertainty, refusing to talk for the amusement of their kidnappers, some combination of the above, he wasn't sure. Lan Wangji was back to stony silence, but *that* was definitely fury first and foremost!

And then, of course, the soft flare and ebb of resentful energy as A'Qing came and went, occasionally brushing against his qi for a little added energy to range farther afield, always with an unsettling rap or tap to keep their captors from getting *too* comfortable.

She really was adorable!

And it was a relief to know that their allies were aware of their plight, even if it was unlikely that they would be able to act on that knowledge.

For his own part… well. This was at least an improvement over the last time he'd been flown somewhere against his will. No one had stabbed or tortured him, for one thing! And while they were doing their best, neither Meng Yao, Su Minshan or even Xue Yang could quite measure up to Wen Chao when it came to pure *loathsomeness*.

Also, Wen Chao had ultimately ended up very thoroughly dead. A precedent that Wei Wuxian had every intention of upholding.

It *was* nice that this "helicopter" had the room for them to sit. Definitely an improvement over being carried on an enemy's sword. Particularly given that they'd been in the air for… quite a while, anyway. Frankly, it was a little boring.

Good. Boredom meant *carelessness*.

"Oi, are we *there* yet? This is taking forever!"

Xue Yang. Seated close to Lan Wangji and the boys, if Wei Wuxian had oriented his sense of his surroundings correctly. A practical arrangement, tactically. It meant that Wei Wuxian would have to move very quickly, when the time came. Which could get tricky; he had the feeling that there wasn't much room to move in here.

"We had to take an indirect route," Meng Yao explained. "By now the project is likely aware that something is wrong, which means the task force will be mobilized. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

"Is that why we're going to Hubei first?" Su Minshan asked, his tone surprisingly deferential. "I mean, since they're probably watching the coast more closely."

"We're taking them to Hubei because those are our orders," Meng Yao corrected, although he sounded amused. Then again, Wei Wuxian had known more than a few people who wielded benign amusement like a dagger in the dark. Meng Yao would probably have done quite well for himself in the politics of the sects.

And if they were going towards Hubei… that explained the slow thickening of resentment in the qi around them. It was subtle, nothing like, oh, the Burial Mounds; if they'd crossed the

distance on foot, he probably wouldn't have noticed the gradual change. Much like how one didn't notice the change in the air walking up a mountain, but it could be crippling if one made the ascent by sword without taking precautions. But they were definitely headed towards the heart of the warping of the dragon lines.

Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not.

At least I'll get to visit after all!

Not to mention that all this thickening energy meant he had some *options* available. Which was good, because by the feel of it, the bindings they'd used on him were some kind of very tough plastic, and they'd used more than one. He could probably snap them if he had to, but it was going to hurt, and odds were he wouldn't be able to hide it.

Which meant that the timing of this would be delicate. He would need to wait for a distraction. But he couldn't wait too long, because odds were that their captors would have reinforcements ready and waiting at their destination – and he doubted they'd keep their prisoners together any longer than absolutely necessary.

More importantly, he wasn't the only one who benefited from the growing resentful energy around them.

Shrrp. *Shrrp*.

He didn't grin – after all, it wouldn't do to give their captors cause to be curious! But he *did* increase the volume of the cheerful little ditty he was humming. Both to be annoying, and to push a little more of that energy to the stubborn little presence scraping away at his bonds.

Really, he was impressed! Most ghosts simply couldn't gather the strength to pull off an apport without becoming so steeped in resentment that they no longer had the clarity of self needed to *use* what they were carrying.

Then again, A'Qing was *very* stubborn… and drawing power not only from the ambient resentment and his help, but also the fact that she was helping to thwart the man who'd murdered her. She had, as Lan Jingyi would say, a *substantial* environmental bonus.

The subtle cutting – more a vibration he felt through the plastic than anything he could hear over the noise of the craft – suddenly stopped, and there was a light tugging at his wrists. Obligingly, he very carefully tested the ties, and this time had to actively bite back a smirk. Not cut all the way through, no… but at this point, snapping what was left would be easy.

Mentally nodding, he hummed a little louder – and this time, it was Lan Yi's song.

It was subtle, but he could feel Lan Wangji's qi stir as the man's attention focused on him… and a moment later, A'Qing's presence moved across the confined space to him.

Which was good, because the sound of the engine had just changed – and a moment later, he could feel the pressure shift in his ears. They must be descending now.

Which meant that if they were going to act, it would have to be very soon.

This is bad. This is really, really bad*, we have to do something!*

Contrary to what a lot of his teachers seemed to think, Lan Jingyi was not stupid. He knew that if they let this thing get to where it was going, they were going to be screwed. Wei Wuxian was awesome and he had all kinds of superpowers, he could probably get away if he went for it, but he wouldn't risk putting the rest of them in danger. The bad guys weren't going to kill him, but they *would* kill the rest of them.

So… I guess that we *means* me*.*

Because, again, *not stupid*, thank you. He knew that he was the expendable one. The video had made Wen Yuan a minor celebrity, and Professor Lan was a respected scholar – plus both of them were kinda like proto-cultivators already and they knew all kinds of stuff. And they had been working with Wei Wuxian for a couple months now. And Jin Ling was Jin Guangshan's grandson, the bad guys would probably avoid doing anything too bad to him.

Lan Jingyi? He was just a schoolkid. No special skills or inside knowledge or powerful relatives. He was the one they'd go after first, to prove they were serious.

Which meant that *he* would have to move first. Because if they tried and it didn't work, he was the one who was going to get it, and that might make the others hesitate.

I owe Wen Yuan so *many apologies for thinking living in an action movie was kinda cool…!*

Okay. Deep breaths. He was going to do… something. *What*, he wasn't really sure, because he was tied up and the hitman guy was *right there*...

Something tugged on the zip tie holding his wrists, and he yelped unintentionally. Because he *knew* there was nothing back there, and…!

And now that creepy Xue Yang guy was smirking at him. "Problem?"

Oh no oh no oh no... "Cramp!" he blurted in an embarrassingly breathless squeak.

Because Wen Yuan had also apologized to *him* for all the teasing he'd copped for hating horror films, and he *remembered* the terrifying mutilated ghost girl who'd tried to scare them away before Meng Yao got them, and Wen Yuan and Professor Lan had been very deliberate in *not* reacting to the ghost talk earlier and *there was something cold and sharp sawing through the zip tie*.

Oh man, he was gonna faint and then Xue Yang would *know* something was up!

…except, he realized belatedly, the whole petrified-with-terror look was probably helping sell the whole "too helpless to worry about" thing, because Xue Yang just cackled at him, and Meng Yao just looked amused. "Apologies," he said. "I know it's a bit uncomfortable. But we should be there soon."

Like that was any comfort?!

“And where is *there*?!” Jin Ling demanded, bristling. “Where the heck are you taking us, anyway?”

Meng Yao just chuckled. “You’ll find out for yourselves,” he said, sounding like Lan Jingyi’s dad on a family road trip.

Jin Ling glowered. Lan Jingyi didn’t blame him. Seriously, Meng Yao was almost *worse* than the creepy hitman – at least Xue Yang owned up to being the bad guy, none of this *oh poor me I’m such a victim, I didn’t have a choice, I just* had *to put a gun to your head* stuff!

“Besides,” Meng Yao said idly, “if you want to be technical, we’re really just taking Wei Wuxian home. Surely you can’t object to that.”

Lan Jingyi blinked. What was *that* supposed to mean? A quick glance at the others confirmed that they were equally baffled, which at least made him feel a little better—

Then he lost his line of thought when the whole helicopter seemed to sort of *bounce* for a second, that weird feeling of sudden weightlessness followed by a stomach-wrenching *jolt* that he associated with roller coasters and airplane turbulence, nearly flinging him off his seat and prompting a whole chorus of startled yelps and curses.

Meng Yao frowned. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Looks like we’re flying into a thunderstorm, sir.” The pilot’s voice was weirdly tense.

Meng Yao frowned and stood, making his way towards the cockpit – although he was clutching at the seats as he moved, as the helicopter bucked around them again. “There shouldn’t be any storms, the forecast…”

Lan Jingyi’s breath caught. Meng Yao was distracted. Su Minshan was still watching Wei Wuxian, but the guy was looking kind of pasty green and wobbly around the edges. Which just left Xue Yang…

And during that first jolt, *the zip tie had snapped*. He’d barely been able to keep from flailing and giving himself away.

Lan Jingyi risked a quick, searching look at the others. Wen Yuan met his eyes, and his face immediately smoothed into the serene look that he wore when he was about to offer an impeccable alibi. Jin Ling’s lips tightened stubbornly.

Professor Lan’s expression didn’t even twitch. But his eyes were steady and knowing.

Lan Jingyi gulped. Okay. He was really going to do this. This was a *thing* now. This was going to work – it *had* to work, no alternatives allowed!

At least Xue Yang seemed to be finding his *incipient hyper-ventilation* funny rather than suspicious. That was fine, he could work with that, he just wished the guy would *look away* for a second—

The helicopter jolted again – and the storage compartment where Meng Yao had stored all the stuff that he and his henchmen had looted from the Jingshi somehow popped open, spilling all the stuff inside out onto the floor, the wooden crate thingy narrowly missing Xue Yang's head.

"What the hell? Didn't anyone tell you you're supposed to *secure* that stuff?" Xue Yang demanded, glowering at Su Minshan.

"At least *I* actually *have* proper training," Su Minshan huffed at him. "Of course I secured them, *you* must have…"

Okay. They were distracted. Now – if he could just get the safety harness strapping him in off without being noticed…!

Just as he was trying desperately to figure out if he needed to be slow and sneaky or just go for *fast*, the release popped open of its own accord.

He *lunged*.

Thank you thank you thank you*, Miss Ghost, if I live through this I'm going to burn* so *much paper money for you…!*

So it turned out that Wei Wuxian was right. Faces were hard. Ow.

Which was a tiny half-hysterical blip of a thought in the back of his brain, because sure, he'd landed one good punch, but Xue Yang was a *stone-cold killer* and the only, *only* way he was going to survive this was to stay on top of the guy and *keep hitting* because if he let up for even a second he was going to be *dead*!

Except that, Xue Yang might not be the biggest guy, but he was definitely older and stronger than Lan Jingyi. Something slammed into his side – knee, elbow, he didn't even *know* – and he went flying straight into Jin Ling as Xue Yang surged to his feet and oh *shit* he had a knife this was so bad—

Shhk.

Xue Yang made a weird sort of punched-out noise, looking down at…

Oh. That was a sword blade coming out of his chest. Huh.

Then it withdrew and Xue Yang sort of staggered and made a breathless sound that might have been an attempt at swearing before he dropped, and Wei Wuxian was grinning at them. "Good job," he said.

"Thanks," Lan Jingyi mumbled, brain still trying to catch up with the fact that he was still alive and Xue Yang wasn't. Which… he was going to have to figure out how he felt about that later, but right now he was going with *relieved*.

Though he was glad Wei Wuxian had gone with stabbity rather than slicey, because he probably would have thrown up if there were body parts flying, although the helicopter cabin

was probably too cramped for proper sword swinging anyway…

And Wei Wuxian hadn't even bothered to take the blindfold off yet. Wow.

Then there was yelling and swearing and the world seemed to slam into place around him as time started again, because it wasn't over yet and Su Minshan had just thrown off Wen Yuan and *oh shit gun*!

Then Professor Lan grabbed the wooden crate that had fallen and slammed it down on the guy's head, and okay, that solved that problem.

Wei Wuxian laughed, pulling off his blindfold. "See? Large heavy things made of wood have their uses!"

Professor Lan huffed. "I maintain that it is *not* an appropriate use for a musical instrument," he said dryly.

"Well. I'm not entirely sure what you meant to accomplish by all this."

Oh shoot, they'd forgotten Meng Yao.

Who was… *not* pointing a gun at them?

Instead, he was just kind of standing at the entrance to the cockpit, shaking his head. Which didn't make sense, shouldn't he be shooting at them…?

Oh. Duh. Of course he isn't. It's not worth it. The guy already *knew* Wei Wuxian could catch bullets. And as small as the space was, he'd only get one shot, there was no way he could take them all down. And if he missed, he might hit something important in the helicopter, or the bullet might bounce and hit him – that was a thing, right?

And…

Meng Yao sighed. "You do realize that we are in *midair*? None of you know how to fly a helicopter. If you wish to reach the ground safely, you have no choice but to cooperate. You're only making things more difficult for yourselves."

Lan Jingyi swallowed. It wasn't that he'd *forgotten* about that, but he'd definitely been trying not to think too hard about it.

"Hmmm." Wei Wuxian blinked innocently. "Lan Zhan? I assume there's a door, yes?"

Lan Wangji inclined his head slightly towards the side of the cabin, never taking his eyes off of Meng Yao. "It may take some effort to open, but yes."

"Then there's no problem!" Wei Wuxian said, grinning sunnily at Meng Yao, and wow, Lan Jingyi would never have imagined you could say *screw you* and sound so cheerful about it. "I can't fly a *helicopter*, but I certainly can *fly*."

Meng Yao raised his eyebrows, obviously trying for amused – but for the first time, Lan Jingyi got the sense that the guy was starting to feel the situation slip out of his control. “You can, perhaps. Surely you don’t mean to leave *them* behind?” He waved a hand, indicating the rest of them. “I imagine it would be rather difficult to fit five people on a sword.”

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Well. I wouldn’t call it *easy*. But not impossible. After all, the boys are small!”

Stalemate.

Lan Jingyi braced himself, trying to look certain and confident and like he didn’t have *any doubts whatsoever* about this plan, and wondered who would give first.

“You would be very vulnerable in the air,” Meng Yao countered, after the pause had lingered just a little too long.

“Hm. True,” Wei Wuxian acknowledged. And then smiled, and it was *all teeth*. “Which means we should do something about you first, doesn’t it?”

“Which means,” Lan Wangji said in a voice of instant freezer burn, “that it is in your best interest to surrender and put us in contact with the proper authorities. If you turn evidence on Jin Guangshan, you will likely face a reduced sentence.”

Meng Yao sighed and shook his head. “You know that wouldn’t accomplish anything…” he started.

Then Wei Wuxian blinked and looked down. “Oh. Well. That’s not good.”

Not good? What was not good, not good was *bad* and things were already bad…!

Then suddenly Wei Wuxian was grabbing him and Jin Ling by the collar, sword clattering to the floor as he dragged them up and away from the back of the helicopter—

And then the back of the helicopter wasn’t there anymore.

Lan Jingyi lost track of *everything* for a few seconds, the world swallowed up by screaming twisting metal and hard impact against *something* and a bizarre flash of something that looked a lot like *teeth* and—

Then a wrenching *jolt* and cold air on his face and the sudden realization that he’d been flung out of the helicopter entirely and into the open air and it was a long, long, *long* way down and he was not too proud to scream.

Thrown from the gaping rent in the helicopter out into freefall, Lan Wangji found that in a strange, contradictory way, he was too terrified to be afraid.

The world scattered into a dizzying whirl of images. A dark sky overhead, the bare edges of roiling clouds cast into relief by pale flickers of lightning. Wind roaring in his ears, as loud as the pounding of his heart. The blades of the helicopter frozen in one of those strobe-like

flickers, still technically airborne but spinning out of control with the tail simply *gone*. Sensation more than sight, of churning, foaming waves far too far below as something sank beneath them. The presence of other people falling beside him—

A strong hand grabbed his arm. Without thinking, Lan Wangji reached out with his other hand, taking hold of Wen Yuan's wrist as they fell together and feeling the boy desperately grabbing his own wrist in return. He was distantly aware that Wei Wuxian still had hold of Lan Jingyi, but the destruction of the helicopter had thrown the lighter Jin Ling farther out, out of reach even if either of them had a hand free – but then Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi reached out, each one grabbing one of Jin Ling's hands, and now they were falling together, and Lan Wangji found himself remembering images of skydivers, forming circles and wheels in the air as they fell.

Except that skydivers had parachutes for when the time came to return to earth. And goggles to protect their eyes from the tearing force of the air whipping past as they fell. He kept his eyes closed, although he knew it was pointless; even with water below, there was no way they could survive the impact from a fall of this height.

Wei Wuxian used his grip on Lan Wangji's arm to pull him close. "Hold on to me!" he shouted into Lan Wangji's ear, barely enough for him to catch the words before the wind tore them away.

Lan Wangji didn't waste time thinking, he just obeyed, wrapping his arm around Wei Wuxian's waist so that the two of them were pressed together. Then he felt the man press his leg against the back of Lan Wangji's knees, twisting both of them into a curled position.

What – we'll fall faster this way…!

Except. Suddenly there was something under their feet, long and flat and thin, and they were *standing* on it as they fell. A fall that was slower now as the object they were standing on pushed back against the inertia of freefall, giving him the disorienting feeling of standing in a rising elevator when he *knew* they were still falling, and he had to tighten his grip on Wen Yuan to keep the boy from being pulled out of his grasp by the force of the deceleration.

Breath catching – and he could *breathe* now, no longer struggling against the wind for air – Lan Wangji opened his eyes.

Suibian was wreathed in blazing red light underneath their feet. He and Wei Wuxian were balanced on the blade together, Lan Wangji with his arm still wrapped around Wei Wuxian's waist while Wei Wuxian's free hand was raised in a mudra. His other hand was clutching Lan Jingyi's, just as Lan Wangji was holding Wen Yuan, while the two older boys were hanging onto Jin Ling, dangling precariously below them.

They were all there. He allowed himself a shaken sigh of relief.

"Wait, we're still falling!" Lan Jingyi yelped. "I thought you said you could fly even with all of us!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes were closed, face set with concentration, but he still managed a smile. "Technically, I said it *wasn't impossible*," he corrected, voice tight but somehow still teasing. "Besides, do you *want* to stay all the way up here?"

A good point. A *very* good point. Not to mention that if they'd actually *stopped*, the sudden deceleration would likely have caused whiplash injuries – and would definitely have wrenched the boys out of their grasp. As it was, Lan Wangji was acutely aware of how close to the edge of the sword Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi were, and he could only pray that they wouldn't lose their grip if they swung to close and cut themselves on it as their collective downward momentum steadily slowed.

"Going down. Going down is *good*," Wen Yuan managed, breathless with residual panic and strain. "Going down *slowly* even better… oh."

Oh? Careful to keep his shoulders back and his weight centered over the sword, Lan Wangji ducked his chin to look down.

Oh.

Still caught in merciless freefall, Meng Yao tumbled down and down, flailing in the air as though he'd tried to grab onto them and missed…

Lan Wangji hoped that Jin Ling was too occupied clinging to his friends' hands to look. Hard impact, even on water, was an ugly death.

Then his heart froze.

Because something massive surfaced, only distinguishable from the waves because it was moving *against* the splash of impact, gleaming dully in a flicker of lightning as it engulfed the body and vanished beneath the water again.

Lan Wangji swallowed. "We must get out of the air," he said urgently, only iron control holding back a note of panic. *Something* had attacked the helicopter; neither air nor water were safe. And the boys' strength would only last so long. He could already feel the ache in his own hand.

"Happily," Wei Wuxian said through gritted teeth, as they finally, *finally* came to a stop, the last of the momentum of the fall spent, less than ten or so meters from the surface. Far too low for comfort. "Where?"

Lan Wangji looked around. Now that the tunnel vision of terror had subsided, he could see that they were hovering over a lake, bordered by what appeared to be mountain foothills, dim bulky shadows in the gloom… and the bright glare of electric lights across some kind of bridge, offset by the dull glow of fire on smoke from the wreckage of the helicopter, which had apparently gone down there.

He hadn't even heard the crash.

Now that he was listening again, however, he realized that he could hear car horns and the voices of people shouting, echoing across the water even with the rumbling of thunder overhead. No rain was falling yet, but now and then pale light flickered over the scene as lightning flashed within the clouds overhead, and he had to brace himself against the fitful gusts of wind that surged and subsided with no warning. Another reason to reach solid ground quickly, before the storm grew any worse.

"Wei Ying. There is a road to our left," he said. "Can you get us there?"

"Wait!" Jin Ling said. "There's a little island over there, it's way closer!"

Lan Wangji's first thought was to agree, if only so they could rest and rearrange themselves… but something in him balked at that. "We need to get to a public space," he said, trusting that instinct. "If what Meng Yao said was true, they were taking us to somewhere nearby. We need witnesses around us, for protection."

Not to mention that they had already been seen, given that Suibian was still blazing furiously against the nighttime darkness, reflected light glinting crimson on the choppy waters. They had to be visible from the road.

"We can hold on," Wen Yuan said fiercely.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes to cast an assessing look at the bridge, then nodded tightly – as Lan Wangji had suspected, it was clearly harder to carry so many people than he'd let on to Meng Yao. Then Suibian was sliding sideways in the air, towards the bridge.

Or… *not* a bridge, Lan Wangji realized as they drew closer and his eyes began to make sense of the play of lights reflected in water and the shadowed bulk of concrete. Instead of a bridge, it was a wall, a massive bulwark of concrete and red-painted steel girders, the color strangely garish in the harsh glare of what appeared to be some kind of industrial lighting. Which tugged at a memory lodged somewhere in the back of his mind…

But by then, the ache in his hand and shoulder as he fought to support the weight of two teenagers while maintaining his balance on the sword had grown to the point that it filled his mind, leaving little room for anything else as he narrowed his focus to holding on for just a little longer—

And then suddenly the burden lessened, and he realized that they'd reached the top of the wall and Jin Ling's feet were on solid ground.

Although not for long, as his legs almost immediately gave out from under him and he sat down hard, blinking rapidly. Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi soon followed, Lan Jingyi not even attempting to keep his footing in favor of sprawling face-down on the ground like he was trying to embrace it, as Lan Wangji and then Wei Wuxian finally stepped off the sword themselves.

His feet hurt, Lan Wangji realized. He was only wearing his thin-soled indoor slip-on shoes, having been preparing for bed when Meng Yao had called to lure them out with claims of an emergency. He hadn't cut himself standing on the blade, which was either a miracle or

something inherent to the process that made flight possible, but he had just been balancing – and doing significant lifting – on a narrow surface only a scant few centimeters in width, and he was feeling it now.

"Wen Yuan?" Lan Jingyi didn't bother lifting his face from the ground. "If I ever complain about you getting to have all the cool adventures again, *please hit me*."

Wen Yuan's laugh was shaky and a little hysterical. "Jingyi. You got to punch *Xue Yang* in the face. How many people can say that?"

Lan Jingyi raised his head a little, blinking. "Oh. Huh. Guess I did, didn't I." He flexed his fingers. "Also, can confirm, punching faces hurts. Wei-laoshi, can I get in on the kicking bad guys in the squishy bits lessons?"

Wei Wuxian laughed and straightened – which was when Lan Wangji realized that he still had his arm around the man's waist, holding him close, and that Wei Wuxian had been leaning against him as they all caught their breath. Feeling strangely flustered, he made himself let go, and refused to allow himself to be disappointed when Wei Wuxian stepped away to take in their surroundings. "Kicking lessons are *always* open," the cultivator said cheerfully. "So! Where are we?"

That… was an excellent question, in fact. Frowning slightly, Lan Wangji took a moment to look around. They had landed on the edge of the wall – which proved to be a full four-lane road, the two lanes on the closest side straddled by a half-dozen massive red mechanical structures that looked… oddly familiar, although he had no memory of ever seeing such a place before. Off to one side, the smoldering cloud of smoke from the wreckage of the helicopter had obscured the road. On the other…

Was that a tour bus?

"Wait a minute… I've been here before!" Jin Ling pushed himself up to his hands and knees, arms shaking. "This is the Three Gorges Dam!"

Lan Jingyi's jaw dropped. "Are you for real?!" he spluttered, shamelessly accepting Wen Yuan's help in getting back to his feet. "I know they said something about Hubei, but that's practically on the other side of it! Why would they drag us all the way out *here*?"

"I'm kind of more worried about what *stopped* them," Wen Yuan said uneasily, eyeing the dark waters of what had to be the reservoir. Strangely choppy waters, even with the wind picking up with the storm overhead, although there was still strangely little rain for the frequency of the lightning—

Then the head broke the surface of the water, rising on a serpentine neck to tower over them. Except that even the great Titanaboa had never been *that* large.

Oh, Lan Wangji thought, oddly distant.

When Wei Wuxian had told the story… Lan Wangji had certainly been daunted by the thought of such a massive, deadly creature existing in reality. But there had always been an

odd sense of disconnect, at the thought of a creature known primarily for its *slowness* being the core of something so terrifying.

Now, staring up at it, Lan Wangji found himself abruptly remembering a very important detail: turtles, especially those that lived in water, were *predators*.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian said into the horrified silence, somehow sounding more bemused than anything else. "So that's where the Xuanwu of Slaughter went."

Well. This was a… situation.

On the one hand – they weren't trapped in a cave with it. Definitely a plus over the last time! But this time, he had Lan Wangji and his three cute little students to think about. And while they were certainly enthusiastic, none of them knew anything about fighting yao, let alone a failed divine beast – and none of them had any weapons, either.

"Do you believe it is the same one you fought before?" Lan Wangji asked quietly.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head, studying the creature looming out of the water. The Xuanwu he had fought had been large enough for a not-small teenager to fit in its mouth – and nearly down its gullet! This one, if anything, was even *bigger*, although that might also be due to the fact that it wasn't in a confined space. And an added fifteen hundred years to grow.

Turtles were known for longevity, after all. It wasn't *that* implausible for one so powerful to have lived this long. So…

"Probably," he admitted, keeping his voice low as well. Suibian was resting in his hand, but more for lack of somewhere to put it than any intent to use – he'd lost track of the scabbard somewhere in the whole *falling* business. He'd seen the Xuanwu snap a Wen cultivator out of the air as Wen Chao and his guards had fled from the cave, before, so flying was probably a bad idea. And a sword blade wasn't going to do enough damage to be very effective without careful planning.

Lan Wangji nodded slowly. "What should we do?" he asked, eyes steady and resolute despite coming suddenly face-to-face with a creature he would have considered impossible only a few months ago. Trusting Wei Wuxian to choose their course of action.

Really, of course he hadn't been surprised – he couldn't imagine how he could have *not* fallen in love with this man.

"First things first. We should find cover," he said. "Somewhere it won't be able to reach." That was a large part of how he'd survived that first encounter, after all – retreating to a section of the cave too small for the beast.

Unfortunately, cover was a bit thin on the ground this time. Other than the big red metal things – he absently made a note to ask about those when there was a little less imminent death and danger to deal with – the top of the dam was one wide open space. The nearest structures were at either end of the dam, and definitely out of feasible running range.

“Use the helicopter,” he decided at last. The smoke wouldn’t be good for anyone, but… “If it *is* the one I fought then it knows that fire hurts. It will avoid it.”

Lan Jingyi made as if to bolt, only for the other two to grab him when he staggered. “Walk!” Wen Yuan whispered urgently. “If that’s a *Xuanwu*… turtle and snake. They talked about that in biology last year, remember? It probably hunts using smell and vibrations. We have to be *quiet*.”

Which was part of how Wei Wuxian had gotten trapped the first time. Going into the water with a bleeding wound would have been suicide!

“But…” Lan Jingy stared wide-eyed at the creature, then looked desperately at Wei Wuxian. “Won’t it see us?” he squeaked, obviously wrestling his volume down at the last moment.

A fair concern. “I don’t think it uses its eyes much,” Wei Wuxian murmured thoughtfully. “When I fought it before, it was in a dark cave. Not having light didn’t seem to bother it.”

Jin Ling swallowed. “Okay. Right. Time to be really, really quiet, then…” he started—

And then someone screamed.

Startled, Wei Wuxian blinked at the very large bus that was standing slightly crosswise on the road, as if it had stopped just a little bit faster than was advisable, probably to avoid the crashed helicopter. A bus full of people who had probably not expected their evening to turn *quite* so interesting.

Ah.

“Change of plans, everyone,” he said mildly, flicking a finger against Suibian’s blade to draw blood before beginning to paint the seals he needed on his palm as the Xuanwu’s head swept towards the sound and then coiled back, preparing to strike. “*Run*.”

That one word seemed to burst the strange bubble of frozen, terrified calm surrounding them. Grabbing Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi, Wen Yuan bolted.

Later, he would realize with a kind of shocked accomplishment that the moment he started moving, he was circulating his qi, sending power and energy to his legs to move faster. Except that then he stumbled and lost the technique, because Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling *couldn’t* do that, and he wasn’t strong enough to carry them. If he moved too fast and pulled them off their feet, they’d fall and then *all* of them would be stuck because leaving them behind was not an option!

Except that he *felt* the air pressure shift as the monster struck and there was no way they’d make it in time—

Then a wash of heat and air hit his back, pushing them forward, and the night lit up red and orange and gold, their shadows long flickering black bands in front of them, and the Xuanwu *flinched*.

Breathless, Wen Yuan dove into the cover of the helicopter's wreckage. He probably picked up some scrapes in the process and he was going to have bruises when all was said and done, but the magic of adrenaline made it all a distant thought as the other two joined him.

Turning to look back, he stared.

Wei Wuxian was kneeling on the roadway, one hand pressed against the concrete and the other raised in a mudra, and *fire* danced in a blazing wall along the edge of the dam, almost twenty meters long and maybe three tall. The Xuanwu was recoiling from the flames, all of its attention squarely on the cultivator, and…

Wei Wuxian's long ponytail swirled around him in the draft from the fire, his lips pulled back in a grim smile, and he looked *so freaking cool*, like a hero straight out of a xianxia movie – or maybe urban fantasy, since he wasn't wearing his robes or even the modern Yiling Laozu getup, just regular everyday clothes.

Given all the bugging eyes in shock-white faces staring out of the windows of the bus, a lot of other people thought so, too.

Also, there were a lot of cell phones being held up in those windows.

Oh man. This is gonna go viral, isn't it?

Wen Yuan found a half-hysterical laugh bubbling in his throat. Because he was pretty sure that however the project had planned to set up Wei Wuxian's first public appearance, this definitely wasn't it. But he had the feeling that Nie Huaisang would give this two thumbs up anyway, because talk about debuting with *style*.

Assuming they lived through this.

"Well, this is *definitely* the same Xuanwu!" Wei Wuxian said, raising his voice to project over the noise of the fire. And despite the intensity of his voice, he still managed to sound cheerful, which Wen Yuan found embarrassingly reassuring. "I think it remembers me… and it definitely remembers that fire hurts!"

"Can you hold it?" Lan Wangji asked, and Wen Yuan suddenly realized that the professor was still standing with Wei Wuxian, a few steps back so as not to impede his movements.

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips. "For now. But not forever!" His eyes flickered to the side. "Can we get them somewhere safer?"

Wen Yuan followed Lan Wangji's glance to the bus sitting slightly akilter in the middle of the road and winced, guessing what his mentor was thinking. The flames were protecting the bus and its passengers for now, but there was no way they'd actually be able to drive away. They were all clustered maybe… a third of the way along the length of the dam wall. Closer to one side than another, but not enough for Wei Wuxian to cover them all the way. And…

Lan Wangji glanced behind him. Towards the *other* side of the dam. "We cannot afford for it to ram the wall."

Wen Yuan felt his blood turn to ice as he suddenly remembered photos of the dam… and the long, long, *long* drop on the other side.

Not to mention, if the dam broke and all the water from the reservoir rushed downstream at once…

It would be bad. Really, *really* bad.

Granted, the dam had supposedly been built to withstand missile strikes. It could probably handle a giant turtle-monster or two… right?

Wei Wuxian huffed and shook his head. “Better to deal with this quickly, then,” he said.

“Can you?” Professor Lan sounded so *calm*, asking that!

And Wei Wuxian just *laughed*! “I’m not seventeen anymore, Lan Zhan,” he said lightly, and tilted his head. Like he was listening to something? “And I think I have some options.”

Options? Against *that* thing?

Lan Wangji just nodded. “I will see to the bystanders,” he said, stepping back and towards the bus.

Lan Jingyi spluttered. “What? That’s it? Seriously?!” he blurted, although at least he kept his voice down. “Don’t they know you’re supposed to *argue* in a scene like this! You know, the whole *I’ll never leave you – but you must* thing!”

Jin Ling choked. “We’re in the middle of *this* and you’re thinking about melodramatic tropes?!” he demanded. “Did you swap souls with Ouyang Zizhen or something?!”

“Look, there are *standards* for this sort of thing!” Lan Jingyi insisted – but his eyes were darting to the two grownups and the shadowy form of the Xuanwu, and Wen Yuan suspected the whole thing had more to do with desperately needing something to break the tension than any actual desire to see the world align with fiction. Or just mouth-autopilot.

“It’s not like any of *us* are going to be any help,” Jin Ling snapped. “Last I checked, none of us had any weapons – or any idea how to fight *giant turtle-snake monsters*.”

Which… raised an important point. “Where are the guards?” Wen Yuan muttered, looking around. All of them were crouched low, both to hide and to stay below the smoke from the helicopter. He could see bits of wreckage scattered across the road – a seat that had torn loose, twisted scraps of metal, the splintered remains of the artifact crate that must somehow have stayed in the helicopter when they were flung into the air. There was… *something* at the edge of the light that he was trying not to look too closely at, because he thought it might have been human. But looking beyond the wreckage…

This was the *Three Gorges Dam*! One of the biggest pieces of infrastructure in the country! Surely there should be guards, security forces, *something*!

Nothing. No lights, no guards, not even *sirens*. Although that might just be the ringing in his ears – and the sharp clear whistle cutting through the roar of fire.

Wen Yuan turned back. He couldn't help it; that sound was clear and ringing and bright, rising and falling in a way that *demanded* attention.

The Xuanwu hissed, a weirdly metallic sound, and snapped in irritation or anger. Then, to Wen Yuan's surprise, it withdrew, submerging beneath the waves almost before he realized what was happening.

For a long moment, no one moved; the only sound was that oddly cheery whistle, the dull roar of the fire, and the crash of water as the waves kicked up by the Xuanwu's movements crashed against the concrete, throwing up spray so high that Wen Yuan could see it sparkling in the light of the flames.

Then he finally remembered to breathe, shoulders relaxing just a little. From the direction of the bus, he could hear a low hum of voices starting up—

"*Stay where you are!*"

It wasn't a choice. That voice went straight to his hindbrain, and he suddenly realized that he'd *never* heard Lan Wangji actually *shout* before…

And Wei Wuxian was *still whistling*.

Then the wave hit the dam, a wall of dark water rising up, up overhead and then crashing down. The wall of fire went out, doused under kiloliters and kiloliters of water that washed right over the road and even the safety wall on the far side. And then death was lunging out of the darkness, jaws snapping—

Wei Wuxian jumped aside just before they closed, spinning in the air with a bright slash of light, and the Xuanwu recoiled again, one eye closed as the blade scored a deep gash in its tough hide.

"*Bad bad bad*," Jin Ling was muttering, "what's he even *doing*, that thing is way too big to fight with just a *sword*...!"

Heart hammering, Wen Yuan looked around desperately. There had to be *something* they could do, beyond just staying out of the way! But Jin Ling was right, the Xuanwu was too *big* to just up and fight it, even if they had anything to fight with other than the wad of practice talismans in his shirt pocket, somehow miraculously still dry after that wave. Maybe if this was a movie there'd be a giant crane or something with conveniently obvious controls that a schoolboy could operate, but…

Lightning flashed overhead – he'd almost forgotten the storm – and his eye landed on the debris from the helicopter, washed up against the wall on the far side.

Something gleamed pale blue on the concrete. And something else, small and straight and black, red silk caught on blue-white metal.

If he thought about it, he'd be too scared to move. So he didn't think.

Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling both yelped in protest as he bolted out of cover. He blocked them out of his mind, just like he blocked the renewed screaming from the bus and the awful heavy pressure in the air that might be the storm and might be resentful energy and might just be the awful certainty that if he looked back the Xuanwu would be right there about to swallow him…!

None of it mattered. He wouldn't *let* it matter, what mattered was the feel of black bamboo in his hand as he pounced and turned. "Wei Wuxian!"

He threw.

Part of his brain gibbered that he couldn't possibly have thrown it far enough, not across a distance like that. But maybe his cultivation practice was paying off again, or maybe Wei Wuxian could summon his dizi like he summoned his sword. The man twisted in the air mid-leap as he dodged another lunge, throwing a hand out, and the black dizi smacked perfectly into his palm.

He thrust his sword down as he came back to ground, leaving Suibian standing upright in the cement, brought the dizi up, and played.

Oh.

The notes rose and fell and *soared*, up into the storm and down into the water, clear and sharp and so unexpectedly *beautiful* even as the song reached right through his ears and into his core, filling him with the urge to get up, *up*, to *move*, energy surging through his blood even though he was just standing there—

Like really good dance music, or the climactic theme of an awesome action movie. Except he'd never thought of those as being *beautiful*, and this… this was.

Then the song was joined by another terrible roaring *hiss* and Wen Yuan's attention jerked away because, oh no, the *Xuanwu*...!

At first he thought it was coming back for another attack – but something seemed to be slowing it. A minute later, Wen Yuan realized to his shock that the water was *moving*, seeming to almost be crawling *up* the monster's sides…

Um. That… wasn't water.

Wen Yuan stared at the shapes climbing and clinging and clattering and in some cases *oozing* up out of the reservoir's depths, and found himself thinking back to the arguments and controversies surrounding the building of the dam. How many villages had been forced to relocate? How many archaeological sites had been flooded?

Just how many graveyards had ended up under the water?

Then the Xuanwu made a horrible shrieking sort of sound, head flying up – and then the noise was cut off by a horrible gout of *something* surging out of its mouth. Blood, was Wen

Yuan's first, stunned thought, except that then the *smell* hit and suddenly it was all he could do to keep his stomach down, because it was rank and he'd smelled putrefying roadkill that wasn't half this bad and he'd just realized that there were *human bones* mixed up in that…

With a strangled roar, the Xuanwu attempted to lunge again – and fell short, hitting the water so hard that another wave sloshed over the edge of the dam again, reeking of blood and worse things and almost knocking Wen Yuan off his feet before Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling steadied him, because they were apparently *idiots* who'd run out of cover after him.

Okay, so maybe he didn't actually have much room to criticize them on that point.

And through it all, Wei Wuxian just kept playing, even as the Xuanwu thrashed, surged up one last time… and then dropped down again, leaving only ominous bubbles rising out of choppy waters. Then the song changed, becoming quiet and soothing, like a lullaby, as the waters slowly calmed.

Then the cultivator stopped, huffed, and put his hands on his hips. "Well. I suppose it's good to wrap up that old loose end, after fifteen hundred years." He looked down at the water, wrinkling his nose at the smell, and then looked over his shoulder, towards the other side of the dam. "But we should probably warn the people farther down the river. I don't think this water will be safe to drink for a while."

Silence answered him, punctuated only by the lapping of the waves and the sound of a very distant siren. Even the storm seemed to have calmed for a moment. Wei Wuxian blinked, looking baffled by all the wide eyes staring at him.

"…*That was awesome!*"

"*Jingyi!*" Wen Yuan complained, hands clamped reflexively over his ears – even though it was way too late to save his hearing. "Do you *have* to?"

"Well, it *was*," Lan Jingyi huffed, although thankfully at a normal volume this time. He straightened his shoulders and started walking towards where Wei Wuxian was standing. Shaking his head, Wen Yuan followed at a slightly slower pace. Now that the adrenaline was ebbing, he was definitely feeling a bit wobbly.

Jin Ling snorted as he walked behind Lan Jingyi. "Aren't *you* the guy who screams like a girl at horror movies?" he needled.

Lan Jingyi sniffed. "Look, ghosts that hang around going after people who had nothing to do with their problems, that's just creepy. The dead showing up to help take down the thing that killed them, that's more like… proactive karma. It's *cool*!"

Wei Wuxian laughed at that, grinning at them. "I'm glad to know you approve!" he said lightly. But then he turned back to look at the reservoir, hands on his hips. "Still. That was *odd*."

Wen Yuan hesitated. *Odd* was definitely not the word he would have chosen for the past… wow, it couldn't have been more than five minutes. It felt *so* much longer. "Is something

wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Wei Wuxian admitted, and glanced over his shoulder. "Lan Zhan!"

The professor had been talking to someone on the bus – probably impressing on them the importance of *respectful space*, given that they hadn't been swarmed yet. But apparently he felt he'd made his point, because at Wei Wuxian's call he turned and began to walk over to them. "Wei Ying?"

Wei Wuxian gestured out over the water. "When did they build this dam, again?"

"It was completed in 2003," the professor said. "A little more than twenty years ago."

Twenty years… oh. "So… how did the Xuanwu get here?" Wen Yuan said, blinking. "There wouldn't have been a lake at all, before they built the dam!" Not to mention that people should have noticed something that big just hanging around!

For that matter, how had no one noticed the Xuanwu moving into the lake? Or… maybe they had? When had the stories about the Three Gorges lake monster gotten started?

Wei Wuxian tapped the dizi against his cheek, frowning. "That's a good question. But I'm more worried about *why*," he said slowly. "When I fought it before, it had been sleeping in a cave for five hundred years. I imagine it's slept a lot since then! So… why come to a place like this, and not a nice cozy cave with no one to bother it?"

Lan Wangji frowned slightly. "The dam has disrupted the dragon lines in the area. Perhaps that attracted it?"

"Or maybe the dam just woke it up," Lan Jingyi suggested. "Maybe it's been hiding out in the mountains and stuff getting messed up got its attention."

"That could be," Wei Wuxian said thoughtfully. "Except… it's not just the Xuanwu. I know you said that the flooding affected graveyards, Lan Zhan, and water *does* carry things… but there are too many restless dead in the water here." His cheeks puffed for a moment with a frustrated breath.

Then he pursed his lips and whistled again, a short, sharp sound that cut through the growl of thunder overhead and reverberated across the choppy, stormy water.

Click. Click. Click.

Lan Jingyi *shrieked*, flinging himself behind Wen Yuan and Jin Ling, and that was when Wen Yuan saw the skeletal fingers clutching at the edge of the dam.

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian smiled. "I think there's someone here with something to say."

Stepping forward, he knelt down next to the hand – and then he *picked it up*, drawing it close to his face, and now Wen Yuan couldn't even pretend that he wasn't looking at a *skeleton*, because he could see the bones of the arm attached to it, one of them broken and both trailing some sort of stringy muck that were probably what was left of the person's clothes.

And Wei Wuxian was *talking* to it; Wen Yuan could just make out his lips moving past the curtain of his hair as he leaned in as if listening.

"You *sure* you really want to learn how to do *that*?" Jin Ling asked Lan Jingyi, his voice shaky under the cover of bravado.

Lan Jingyi didn't take his wide-eyed stare off Wei Wuxian. "…wow," he finally muttered after a minute. "That *is* kinda cool."

Finally, Wei Wuxian patted the skeletal hand, smiling. "Thank you," he said.

The bones slid away and out of sight. A few seconds later, Wen Yuan thought he maybe heard a quiet splash of something dropping into the water.

Wei Wuxian sighed and straightened again, eyeing the lake. Then he huffed. "Well. That explains quite a few things."

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji said, stepping closer. *Much* closer than he normally got to other people, Wen Yuan noticed… and then seriously had to wonder about his priorities, if he was thinking about that right now.

Wei Wuxian hummed, tucking his flute into his belt. "A moment," he said, stretching his arms.

Then he brought his hands together sharply.

The clap rang out across the dark water, and a few seconds later came bouncing back, one after another, as it echoed back from the shadowy slopes that surrounded the reservoir. Only, rather than fading, the echoes seemed to build on each other, bouncing back and forth and picking up new layers each time—

The water began to glow.

Or… not the water. Something *in* the water, glowing sullen red like embers that were almost too low to see. And not just in the water; Wen Yuan could see it on the sides of the hills, long lines connecting points in a pattern that was almost…

"A ward," Lan Wangji breathed. Then his brow furrowed slightly. "Or… it seems more like the banners you used in the cleansing."

"That's because it is." There was an odd note to Wei Wuxian's voice. "This is a lure flag formation. It's just in the ground, not on a flag."

Wen Yuan blinked. "So… what's it doing here?" he asked, trying not to sound too uneasy. But… the wards in the museum were one thing, that had basically been a workspace, right? This, though… this was way out in the middle of nowhere, or it had been before the dam was built.

And it was big. Really big. The lines of the seal covered the whole valley that the reservoir had filled!

He officially had a Bad Feeling about this.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. “Because something was sealed here.” He tilted his head. “Really, it’s a clever way to use the flags! The ghost was too strong to simply seal, I imagine. So instead, they used the lures to keep it *here*, where it was less trouble.”

“So… what’s the catch?” Jin Ling asked suspiciously.

Wei Wuxian raised an eyebrow at Wen Yuan. Right, he needed to learn to do this sort of thing, so…

Um. *Eep*. “If the ghost wasn’t *sealed*, then… it’s probably gotten even stronger. Especially if the array pulled in other ghosts, too.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “Exactly! You have to be careful with my flags. If they’re not prepared correctly, you can draw in things from much farther away than you actually wanted.”

Ohboy. Wen Yuan looked out across the *valley-sized formation* and gulped. “…It’s been pulling in *everything*, hasn’t it.”

“Hm. Not everything,” Wei Wuxian said judiciously. “Even at this size, I doubt it would reach much beyond the borders of the sect lands as I knew them – probably not even all of the People’s Republic today. But within that range…” He shrugged, smiling crookedly.

“And thus the warping of the dragon lines,” Lan Wangji said quietly.

Wei Wuxian nodded. “Energy is energy. Qi is qi. The formation is meant to draw in resentful energy, but at this scale? It would affect even natural qi flows, at least a little. And a little over time can become quite a lot!”

Lan Jingyi gulped. “So… no touchie the qi version of a nuclear waste dump. Right?”

“We may not have that luxury,” Lan Wangji said, and pointed.

Wen Yuan blinked at the lines under the water – and then looked again. “They’re… not just harder to see because they’re underwater. Are they. They’re actually *weaker*.”

“Erosion,” the professor agreed. “The formation is failing.”

“Several anchors are already gone,” Wei Wuxian agreed. “I think it *mostly* still works, but it’s likely that a few things have already slipped out.”

“An interesting suggestion. Perhaps you would like to discuss the implications?”

Wen Yuan jumped, barely biting back a strangled yelp as he whirled around, because where, *who…*?

Flanked on either side by armed soldiers, Jin Guangshan smiled, genial and urbane and utterly *empty*.

“You are a difficult man to find, Yiling Laozu,” he said.

NOTES:

Yes, I absolutely crammed in shout-outs to a bunch of my favorite scenes here…

Soooo… confession. My plotbunnies *really, really* wanted a Godzilla!Xuanwu appearance, because *giant monster whee!* Awesome fight scene!

Except that when I actually got to said fight scene, I realized I had a problem, because Wei Wuxian was the only main character who could realistically do *anything* about it. I couldn’t even have the others getting bystanders into cover, given the layout of the dam. That’s not good fight scene writing!

And, frankly, a Wei Wuxian with fully developed guidao against a giant monster with a belly full of *the remains and resentment of the people it ate*? That, my friends, is a very one-sided fight. And not in the monster’s favor.

My plotbunnies: “…have the Xuanwu be a Fake-Out Boss?”

Could the Xuanwu of Slaughter *really* reach high enough to snap at an airborne helicopter? Eh, probably not. Could it actually bite clean through said helicopter? Eh, probably not. But it was cool, so… Cue Jedi handwave. Details? What details?

Sorry, Meng Yao, no poetic death at the hands of the people you betrayed the most this time… but hey, you got to be munched by an ancient abomination no one knew existed, that has to count for something?

(Speaking of. Does anyone find it a little unfair that throughout hundreds of fanfic AUs, Wen Chao somehow *always* manages to escape the Xuanwu? Seriously, the Xuanwu should get the chance to chomp that guy sometimes. As a treat.)

As an aside, I used snapping turtles as my baseline for the Xuanwu, since they’re known for being very effective ambush predators, although technically the only ones that exist today are native to North America. Fun fact, the species name for the common snapping turtle is *serpentina*, due to the very mobile head and neck.

When I wrote the scene in Chapter 19 where Wei Wuxian explains about alternative uses for musical instruments in combat, I knew then and there that Lan Wangji *was* going to whack someone over the head with his guqin in the finale. Although I confess, I chickened out a little bit when I realized that if the guqin was on board the helicopter, it would be destroyed in the crash, and I couldn’t bring myself to do that. So! Artifact crate it is!

It’s hard to say what sort of weight Suibian can carry. All we know is that Suibian is optimized for speed and agility rather than strength, and that doesn’t mean much when we never actually get a demonstration of what that means. (Doubly so considering that we only

see Wei Wuxian use Suibian *once* in the entire novel – twice if you count the porn prank.) But given that he manages a stalemate between himself on Suibian and Su Minshan's full weight *plus* whatever force the waterborne abyss is exerting to drag Su Minshan under? I'm saying yes, he can at least slow the fall of four other people.

One fun bit of unintended foreshadowing: as I was working on this chapter, I realized that since I already established in the skateboarding bit that Wei Wuxian had been experimenting with flying tricks and mid-air rescue, *he very likely would know some skydiving freefall techniques*. Which worked out *perfectly* for the fall from the helicopter, which I'd planned from fairly early on.

A note on the tour bus: I have not been able to figure out how accessible the Three Gorges Dam actually *is*, in RL. Looking at photos, it really does look like there's a highway running along the top of it! Going by first principles, however, I highly doubt it would be publicly accessible. I did, however, find a couple references to tours going up there, and I can imagine night tours as well – the view would be incredible! Sooo… well, I tried to be accurate, we can attribute remaining discrepancies to the fact that this is a "real world" that's not *quite* our own reality.

Regarding Chenqing: I am firmly of the opinion that Chenqing is another bit of misdirection in the novel. It gets played up as this dread spiritual tool, perfectly in line with the classic Blackened Protagonist tropes…

And yet. At no point after being summoned back does Wei Wuxian go, *"Ah, if only I had Chenqing!"* In fact, looking for Chenqing never seems to cross his mind; he's perfectly content making do with his random bit of wild bamboo hastily hacked into shape with a borrowed sword in the span of a minute or less (and eventually fixed up by a long-suffering Lan Wangji) for the entirety of the novel! And we eventually find out that he was fine letting a toddler chew on Chenqing – and, contrary to fandom's weird love of "Wei Wuxian is a bit irresponsible as caretaker and doesn't think about things being dangerous," all you have to do is look at how he handles the juniors to realize that he would *not* tolerate Wen Yuan doing anything genuinely dangerous. All of which makes me think that there's no special power in Chenqing, no secret Burial Mounds energy. It's just a nice flute he's familiar with and fond of. (And probably a convenient McGuffin he can use to sidetrack people who are being nosy about his cultivation.)

That said, it is strongly implied in the novel that using a flute gives him a power boost, which is why he goes to the trouble of making one to fight the Dancing Goddess, which then leads to the epic moment in the finale when Jiang Cheng throws Chenqing to him. (In fact, part of what I love about the finale is the way it echoes the whole Mo Manor/Mount Dafan arcs!) I recall reading somewhere that part of it is just that the sound of a flute *carries* farther, but I think that was fanon (especially since then you have to contend with the whole "but obviously Wen Ning doesn't need to physically hear him" thing). So for my purposes here: I'm going with, the flute sound carries farther, is more intense, and has a wider range than just whistling, so using one acts both as a force multiplier and gives him more precise control and a wider variety of options.

And if you're curious, the song playing in my head as I wrote the scene was the flute part from *Elan* by Nightwish. Yes, I know, wrong instrument and wrong musical tradition, but there was a cool donghua AMV that used it… (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ASE1_cGVLE&list=PLryVAbo0rGpiFMdxshcNYXCTkzKxE0FVy)

(As a fun aside, music does in fact trigger actual physiological effects, including heart rate and neurochemical release, so it actually makes a lot of sense for Wei Wuxian to use it for emotional effect, and particularly for rousing or calming the dead. Which also fits with the canon fact that he can use just about any song, as opposed to the way the Lan seem to do musical cultivation.)

And while it seems weirdly popular in fandom to describe Wei Wuxian's music as creepy, in the novel he's famed for how *beautiful* it is; the usual descriptions are on the lines of "birds soaring to the heavens" and "divine." I mean, I get that people go for "he has no idea how creepy it sounds!" because they think it's funny… but I have to raise an eyebrow at how often "funny" is employed to undermine Wei Wuxian's competence.

Chapter 24: Revenant

Chapter Summary

Of the past and of the future.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: this chapter contains an inside POV of someone becoming a resentful ghost. And I suppose I should tag this for the death of two canon characters, although I don't think anyone is going to mourn one of them, and I explicitly noted in the very first chapter that the other has been dead for quite some time. Looking at some of the comments, I think there are at least a few people who either missed that or didn't believe me…

Also, warning for another long meta in the endnotes.

Oh no. He's here, he's actually here*, this is so bad…*

Wait. Why *is he here? He never puts himself out in front for the dirty work, that's what his money and his minions are for!*

"Please tell me this is a *very* bad joke."

Jin Ling blinked, thoughts derailed. Because Wei Wuxian sounded…

"*Fifteen hundred years*. Cultivation is just a story now! The sects aren't even a *footnote* in the records!" Wei Wuxian threw his hands in the air. "All that, and you're telling me that ridiculous title is *still* following me around?!"

Jin Ling blinked. Wen Yuan had been emphatic that Yiling Laozu was the name *they'd* given Wei Wuxian, back when everyone thought he was an ice mummy. Was he actually saying…

Jin Guangshan chuckled. He probably meant it to be all patrician and indulgent, but to Jin Ling it just sounded *mocking*. "What you call yourself does not matter. *Yiling Laozu* is the name the world knows you by. And you are quite *famous*."

There was something weird about how he said that. Almost… bitter? Which didn't make sense, but then again none of this made any sense anyway!

Between the fall and the monster… just a minute ago, he'd been so wobbly that it was amazing he'd still been on his feet. Now…

Outrage flooded in, pushing the shakes and the fear off to the side, and Jin Ling planted himself in front of his friends, glaring at his grandfather. "Have you gone *crazy*?" he demanded. "You send a bunch of thugs and criminals to kidnap us, and now you think you can just drag us off and nobody's going to say anything?"

Actually, he probably did think that. It wasn't like stuff like that hadn't happened before. Sure, no one *talked* about it, but it happened.

Except that there were easily a dozen cell phones pointed at them and recording *right now*, and at least half of them were probably livestreaming the whole thing. Even the best censors in the world wouldn't be able to scrub this before hundreds of thousands of people saw it. And it wasn't like Jin Guangshan was lacking in enemies who would *love* to take him down hard.

Seriously. *Had* he gone crazy? Because this was insane! What did he even expect to get out of this?

"That man is a valuable archaeological specimen and therefore he is the property of the National Administration of Cultural Heritage," Jin Guangshan said dismissively, the corner of his lip curling slightly. "As it is clear that the security arrangements of Cloud Recesses University are inadequate, I will be taking him into custody."

"You have *got* to be kidding!" Lan Jingyi shouted. "No one is going to buy that, not when your guys are the ones who kidnapped us in the first place!"

Now that curl of Jin Guangshan's lip was a full-on sneer. "How is that any concern of mine?" he asked.

A chill went through Jin Ling with a physical shock, as if he'd fallen into icy water. Because… because…

Because Jin Guangshan would never say that.

His grandfather was a lot of things, many of which Jin Ling didn't even like thinking about, but before anything else, Jin Guangshan was a *politician*. Dismissing the opinions of ordinary people? Sure, he'd think it. But say it out loud? *In public?*

Monsters were real. *Ghosts* were real. And that meant…

Swallowing, Jin Ling took an involuntary step back. "You're not Jin Guangshan."

The words came out shaking, not boldly accusatory the way he wanted. But he still said them.

A strong, gentle hand came to rest on his shoulder. "No, I think he's not," Wei Wuxian said, subtly pushing Jin Ling towards Lan Wangji as the cultivator stepped forward slightly.

Tilting his head to one side, Wei Wuxian studied those awful, empty eyes. “You haven’t been Jin Guangshan for quite some time, have you?” he said thoughtfully. Raising an eyebrow, he added, “Perhaps you’d like to speak in your own voice now? I’m sure you’re tired of limiting yourself to the mask of a puppet.”

Puppet?! Jin Ling almost yelped – only for it to freeze in his throat as Jin Guangshan’s face… changed.

Or, not exactly. It was still the face of Jin Ling’s grandfather, but… it was almost like his face was just a putty mask on someone else, because Jin Guangshan would never make that sort of expression, cold and disdainful and not making even the slightest effort to hide it.

“That *fool* should have known better than to touch something he couldn’t understand,” Jin Guangshan – no, *the ghost* said, a corner of Jin Guangshan’s upper lip curling dismissively, and even the voice was wrong, the timbre of Jin Guangshan’s voice but haughty and impatient.

Wei Wuxian didn’t even blink at the change. “Well then. Based on the stories, I would say you would be Hou Jing… but then, those stories aren’t quite right, are they?”

Jin Guangshan’s face twisted in sudden, alien fury. “You *dare*?! As if that empty-headed dog was ever more than a pretender! A worthless mundane *fool* who thought himself the equal of his betters!”

Wei Wuxian just chuckled. “Ah, so you *were* a cultivator! I wondered. Well, stories do get things mixed up.” He tapped his cheek thoughtfully. “So how long has it been since you slipped out of the seal? That must have taken some doing!”

Weird. He was talking to the… the ghost, but Wei Wuxian’s attention seemed to be as much on the soldiers behind him as on the bad guy himself…

The very *nervous* soldiers. Jin Ling had been too busy worrying about the *really big guns* to notice, but the soldiers looked at least as terrified as he felt!

Although he supposed… Giant monster, creepy ghost thing, avenging undead – at least Jin Ling had known stuff like that was *possible* before seeing it all in action. No wonder these guys were creeped out!

Which… might not be a good thing. Su Minshan and his jumpy trigger finger was part of what had started this whole mess. And these weren’t just security guys, they were *soldiers* and those were real guns. He didn’t think Wei Wuxian was up to catching *hundreds* of bullets all at once.

“Jin Ling.”

He started. Professor Lan’s voice was low and quiet, pitched to carry no farther than absolutely necessary.

“The seal is still mostly intact. For the ghost to have escaped, it must have a physical anchor of some kind, something that would have allowed it to be carried out of the seal and keeping it from being pulled back in. Jin Guangshan is likely carrying it.”

Jin Ling swallowed. “You think that’s how he got…?”

“It is possible.”

Great, just *great*. Jin Guangshan didn’t go for gaudy when it came to his clothes, he was too aware of the importance of *appearing* somber and frugal. So if he was carrying a cursed artifact or something, it would have to be small…

Oh. Augh, he was an idiot! “His ring,” Jin Ling muttered, trying to keep quiet so they wouldn’t break the fragile stalemate Wei Wuxian was holding for them. “Wen Yuan said he thought it was the *Three Gorges* Ring, from when they were building the dam – it’s from here, he’s always wearing it…”

He glanced at the faceoff again and gulped. Jin Guangshan’s face was set in a cold, dismissive sneer, utterly unlike the man’s preferred facade of patrician congeniality.

“*Enough*!” the ghost snapped. “I am not here to play your pointless games, Wei Wuxian! I am here to claim what I am *owed*!” He made a sharp gesture with his hand. “Seize them all!”

Erk.

A ripple of unease went through the soldiers, as they glanced at each other with wide eyes, before they started to advance. And then stopped, because Wei Wuxian shifted his position to stand squarely between the soldiers and the rest of their little group. And *smiled*.

Which. Well. He was a cultivator, he’d just taken out a giant monster, he wasn’t someone they could just shoot… and that was a really, really scary smile.

Especially when Lan Wangji stepped up to join him. The professor wasn’t smiling, he just stared at them with that expressionless look of stone, and obviously even soldiers hadn’t signed up to deal with *that*.

“Look, there’s no need for trouble,” one of the soldiers said after a moment. “But this *is* a restricted area and you entered without permission. So we do have to ask you to come with us…”

“Oh, come *on*!” Lan Jingyi said – although this time he stayed behind the two adults. “That’s BS and you know it! We didn’t *ask* to be here, we got tied up and *dragged* here in that stupid helicopter! By a bunch of criminals that *that guy* sicced on us! And now you’re going to act like it was *our* idea? He’s not even denying it was him!”

“Which should be proof enough that he’s *not* the guy you’re supposed to be taking orders from, even if he didn’t just admit it himself!” Jin Ling threw in. Because there was no way that Jin Guangshan wouldn’t have tried to claim plausible deniability, and instead he was acting like he had the right to do whatever he wanted, like some…

Well. Like some highborn lord in a period drama, actually.

Oh great, the soldiers were looking even more twitchy, white-rimmed eyes darting around like they were looking for a way out of this mess, and Wen Yuan hadn't even added his two cents yet.

Wait. Where *was* Wen Yuan?

Stomach dropping, Jin Ling tried to look around without actually taking his eyes off the guards or giving away what he was doing – which was probably why it took him several heart-hammering seconds before a glimpse of white in the corner of his eye led him to his friend, who had slipped away while everyone's attention was distracted to make his way over to the big tour bus that Jin Ling had completely forgotten about. He was standing mostly hidden by the corner of the bus, and it looked like he was maybe arguing with the driver?

Probably trying to get them to step on the gas and get out of here before things really blow. That was definitely a Wen Yuan thing to do.

Jin Ling just wished he could convince himself that it would do any good. But even if Wen Yuan convinced them, even if the bus leaving didn't set everything off… this *was* a high-security area, there'd just be more guards on the other side of the dam, right? No way they'd have missed all this. But they'd have no idea what was going on. If the bus came tearing down the road in the wrong direction, they'd probably get the wrong idea.

Movement caught his eye; the soldiers were fanning out like they were trying to encircle their little group, and one of them was holding his gun like he might just shoot it anyway just *because*...

Jin Ling was stomping forward before he could think better of it, because he didn't *want* to think better of it, he just looked that jerk straight in the eyes. "Are you *serious*?" he demanded. "Sure, go ahead, start shooting at a bunch of *kidnapping victims* with a whole bunch of people *watching you* and…"

"You little *idiot*!"

Jin Guangshan was older, and he liked his wine and his food and his indulgences. He wasn't *unhealthy* or anything, but he definitely wasn't exactly in shape, either. And… to be totally honest, Jin Ling had taken a guilty sort of comfort in that – knowing that if anything *really* bad happened, he could probably outrun the man if he had to.

Except that the ghost moved *so fast*. He didn't even *see* Jin Guangshan move, he was over *there* and then suddenly there was a grip like iron on Jin Ling's arm and *ow*...

"You little fool, you should know better than to interfere with your elders! Now stay out of the way…!"

And he was getting dragged away from the others and his feet were half off the ground, he couldn't get any leverage…

Don't just dangle like a baby cat!

Drawing his foot up, he kicked.

He was just wearing sneakers, not the sort of hard heavy boots that Nie Mingjue liked, and the angle was bad, he only managed to hit the side of the knee. But it was enough to make the ghost in his grandfather's body stumble for a second, grip loosening.

Something glinted on Jin Guangshan's hand. Acting as much on instinct as thought, Jin Ling reached over, grabbed, and *dropped*.

Auuugh I'm very sure fingers aren't supposed to make that sort of noise!

Then the ghost *shrieked*, and the sound skipped straight past his ears to drag razor claws through his *soul*, because it was rage and hate and fury twisted far past anything even vaguely human. Jin Ling didn't even feel himself hit the concrete, too busy desperately scrabbling to get some distance between him and that horrible sound, fingers buzzing like he'd gotten a static shock—

Then suddenly he was tucked under Wei Wuxian's arm as the cultivator jumped back, away from Jin Guangshan and that furious *scream* and the growing sense of a strange pressure in the air, like a storm about to break.

"That was well done," the cultivator chuckled. "Now we just need to survive the results!"

Wait. What did he mean, *survive*…?

Then the scream stopped.

And all hell broke loose.

Once, during his time traveling before starting his degree program, Lan Wangji had found himself in the midst of a hurricane. It had been his own foolishness, in part; growing up in the Cloud Recesses, his only real experience of such weather was through the news reports, generally filtered to prevent panic and rumors. He hadn't truly appreciated what a storm warning could truly mean.

He vividly remembered the way the wind had made it difficult to stand, the rain hitting his face with the bruising force of hailstones, the storm surge that had nearly taken his feet out from under him as he'd struggled towards shelter, terrified and angry because *the forecast said…!*

It had been one of many experiences that had profoundly reshaped his youthful certainty that the world was a place that was orderly, rational, *predictable*.

The forces unleashed now brought that storm to mind – and in comparison, the leashed energies of the oracle bones had been a passing spring rain.

The resentment in the air wasn't just visible, it bordered on *physical*. *Hate* and *rage* and *fear* and *grief* pulsed and pounded around him, bound into a matrix of *not fair, not right, why why why* why*...!*

And pain. So much pain.

He almost didn't notice that the actual storm overhead had broken, despite the rain suddenly pouring down in torrents, until the world flashed white around him. The hairs stood up on his arms, not in atavistic reaction but in response to the actual charge in the air as one of the towering red-painted lifts nearby sparked. Residual electricity ran up and down the struts, the strange half-visible haze in the air tinting the blue-white arcs an eerie violet that brought to mind volcanic lightning.

Then something shifted, and the relentless pressure of the tumult eased as a few sharp notes brought a shimmering red barrier blazing to life around them.

"What is happening?" he asked, shifting to move closer to Wei Wuxian. He had to raise his voice just to hear himself over the rain and the spectral roar.

"Well…" He could hear the wry smile in Wei Wuxian's voice as the man lowered his dizi. "That ring let the ghost separate *part* of himself from the array… but I think he left more of himself behind in it. And now that he's so close to it again? I think the other part woke up. Along with everything else in the array."

The array which had been drawing in resentful energy from throughout China for who knew how many years. Meaning…

Lan Wangji drew in a sharp, apprehensive breath. "The ghost is the core of an abyss."

Wei Wuxian's lip twitched ruefully. "So it appears."

Lan Wangji made himself breathe through the building panic, centering himself in his own reactions to keep the roar of *other* in the air at bay as he adjusted his position so that Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi were safely sheltered between him and Wei Wuxian. He had lost track of Wen Yuan somewhere in the chaos—

A flicker of blue light, too steady to be lightning, caught his eye. Wen Yuan had positioned himself between the bus and the torrent of energy, and…

Oh. He was holding up one of the practice talismans that he'd been making. The light was unsteady and uneven; even as Lan Wangji watched, he saw the talisman crumble, overwhelmed by far more energy than it was ever meant to block. And then it was immediately replaced by another Wen Yuan pulled from his pocket, pale-faced but clearly determined to give the bystanders what protection he could, and Lan Wangji was *so proud* of him.

Children accounted for, he turned his focus back to the storm of building energy. "Can you calm the ghost?" he asked urgently.

“That could be tricky,” Wei Wuxian admitted. “He’s been soaking in the resentment drawn in by that array for a very long time.”

Which meant that the ghost might well have *forgotten* the desires that had driven it in the first place. Even if it hadn’t, whatever lay at the heart of the ghost’s resentment might well be something that the modern world was *incapable* of offering.

“Still,” Wei Wuxian mused, “we might as well try asking.” Lifting the dizi to his lips, he began to play again.

The reaction was immediate; the whirl of anger and energy began to whip this way and that, the churn growing chaotic as the song threaded through the tumult, curious and questioning —

“**You dare!**”

That was no longer Jin Guangshan’s voice in any form, crackling and reverberating with a thousand fragmented voices as he began stalking forward, moving as though the storm meant absolutely nothing.

“**You dare play the hero and defend them? Know your place!**”

“What the heck?!” Lan Jingyi yelped in protest, hands raised as if to protect his head, or maybe cover his ears against that terrifying voice. “Jin Ling got the ring! That was supposed to stop him, wasn’t it?”

Wei Wuxian didn’t pause his playing, eyes fixed on Jin Guangshan’s form. But he looked grimly unsurprised.

“A long-term possession may not be so easy to break,” Lan Wangji started—

Somewhere in the tumult was a strangled shout, as a wild-eyed soldier screamed and brought his gun around to bear. Reacting on instinct, Lan Wangji grabbed Wei Wuxian and the boys and dropped, bringing all of them down below the line of fire.

The spray of bullets tore through Jin Guangshan’s body with all the power of a high-powered military machine gun fired at close range. The blood was an eerily brilliant red in the strange light, and all Lan Wangji could do was keep everyone down and pray that Jin Ling hadn’t seen it.

Jin Guangshan’s body dropped gracelessly to the ground. And something *snapped*.

The air went perfectly, utterly *still*. Even the rain seemed to have stopped, leaving a silence that thundered louder than the screaming rage that preceded it. The very air in his lungs and pounding of his heart seemed muffled, a dulled *thwom, thwom, thwom*.

No. That wasn’t *his* heartbeat.

Forcing his head back up, Lan Wangji stared.

Overhead, the clouds were churning against each other, coiling inwards towards a central eye crackling with that strange violet-tinted lighting. And below, the waters of the reservoir swirled in response, forming a widening whirlpool that plunged down and down, perhaps to the very bottom of the reservoir.

And from the whirlpool, something rose to hover in the air.

The sword was ancient. The grip and scabbard had clearly decayed long ago, the hilt tarnished, and the blade corroded to almost nothing. It looked as if a single careless touch might make it crumble to rust and dust.

And it radiated black rage, pulsing hate and fury and seething resentment in waves that Lan Wangji could physically *feel* with the force of a hand closing on his throat.

"Well." Wei Wuxian bounced back to his feet, eyeing the sword hovering over swirling water. "That's one way to draw out the core of the abyss, I suppose." He raised his dizi again – then cursed and dodged to the side, barely evading the lunge of Jin Guangshan's corpse, eyes glazed and unseeing even as it whirled to attack again with a single-minded speed like nothing living.

(Still dressed in his pressed suit, tidy outside the gaping, bloody bullet holes, some detached corner of Lan Wangji's mind noted with bemusement. So much for that particular trope.)

Wei Wuxian evaded the second attack as well, his brow furrowed. His eyes were darting between Lan Wangji and the corpse, uncharacteristically hesitant, and Lan Wangji abruptly realized the man was weighing whether to remain close to defend them, or if he should try to draw the threat away instead.

About to call out, sudden movement over the water caught Lan Wangji's eye.

He didn't think – had no *time* for thought, not even the time to process what he was even doing with his conscious mind. Without a thought, his hand flew out, *calling*—

Blue-white steel gleaming in his hand, he struck the dark sword from the lake away before it could plunge into Wei Wuxian's back.

Then he froze as his actions caught up with him, staring at the lambent blue gleam of the sword resting in his hand.

Wei Wuxian's laugh was breathless, but the genuine delight was unmistakable. "I *told* you Bichen would suit you!"

So he had, and it was eerie how *right* it felt this time…

But Lan Wangji was also acutely aware of the sudden exhaustion dragging at his limbs. Whether it was the accumulated fatigue of so many crises in rapid succession or simply the effort of using a spiritual sword meant for a fully trained cultivator, he was down to the final dregs of his endurance. He *could* not block another strike.

You are a scholar – think*!*

“You,” he realized suddenly. “The ghost – it is focused on *you*.”

Yiling Laozu, it had said, when speaking with the voice and manner and *mind* of Jin Guangshan. But when speaking as itself… the ghost had called him *Wei Wuxian*.

“It knew you,” he breathed.

The ghost snarled. “And what good were you? **Wh**at hap**pened to your** damn**ed pro**mise**! You said you’d always serve me!**”

For just a moment, Wei Wuxian went utterly still, grey eyes wide.

Then he exhaled, long and slow and resolute. “Lan Zhan. I have an idea.”

Lan Wangji nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

The cultivator’s lips quirked slightly. “Maybe the hardest thing of all,” he said. “Nothing.”

Then he tucked his dizi into his belt and *walked away*.

Lan Wangji choked. Wei Wuxian was walking towards Jin Guangshan’s corpse, which was preparing to lunge again, and the sword from the lake was returning for another attack and he wasn’t even *looking* at it—

Wei Wuxian asked him to do nothing.

The corpse leapt.

The sword slammed through flesh.

And Jin Guangshan’s body fell to the concrete, run through by ancient steel. Abruptly, the sense of screaming pressure… vanished.

It blocked the attack, Lan Wangji thought blankly.

It didn’t make any sense. The ghost possessing Jin Guangshan and the resentment of the ancient sword were one and the same. So *why*…

Wei Wuxian sighed, kneeling down next to the tangle of corpse and sword. “Some things really don’t change. You never did know how to admit to yourself that you cared, did you, Jiang Cheng?”

Reaching out, he rested his fingers on the hilt.

(*Whirling impressions. Fragments of memory, of feeling. It had been so long, there was so little left.*)

An empty room. An empty gate.

He's not coming back.

Ungrateful wretch! He wouldn't have dared leave if I had my core. I should have known better than to trust worthless promises!

I'll show them. I don't need him – don't need any of them! I'll rebuild Yunmeng Jiang bigger, better, stronger than before.

And then I'll find him. I'll make him regret ever even thinking of leaving!

Where is he where is he nothing but fools imitating his stupid tricks, how dare they! Tell me where he is – beat it out of you…!

A man in Jin gold, serious and solemn, talking about watch towers, the need for proper order, sects meddling in each other's affairs.

Fine by me. Damn old Lan witch keeps asking about him, she's probably hiding him in that stupid would-be temple. Hah, serves him right!

Sects bickering among themselves. An heir murdered and three lesser sects wiped out entirely in retaliation – *not my problem, why should I care? All the more hunts for us!*

Searing pain – *poison, a stupid poison, if I had my core it wouldn't even matter…!* – and that same Jin, and now he's *smiling*!

"I really must thank you. Recruiting him would have been preferable, but he was too loyal. If you hadn't driven him out, our assassins wouldn't have reached him."

What?

Didn't drive him out, he left! It's his fault!

No. ***Their*** *fault,* ***they*** *did it, it was* ***them!***

Death wasn't cold. It *burned*.

traitors backstabbers ***kill them kill them ALL***

Fire. Blood. Bodies in gold and white and green and even purple, the screaming rage of more and more dead *rip shred them apart until I find him I will* make *him come back* ***come back***

~~*not me not* ***my*** *fault never my* ***fault***~~

Something. Calling. River mountains flags ***his flags…!***

(*Within the whirl of fragmented furies, a frozen moment.*)

Two men stood looking out over the shadowed valley.

“You’re sure the array will hold?”

The speaker’s companion shook his head, although not in negation. “I don’t know,” he admitted quietly, voice lowered even though they were too far from the nearby encampment for any eavesdropper to hear. “Wei-laoshi’s lure flags were never meant to be used like this. But there aren’t enough of us left to build and maintain a traditional seal. We’ll have to simply hope… and keep close watch.”

*you dare you dare **die**!*

The other huffed loudly. “Well. At least the fengshui here is good. The river will keep too much resentment from accumulating. We should be able to handle the rest, at least long enough to train new disciples so we can cleanse this properly.”

“Good.” The face that turned to the encampment on the slope of the valley was tired. Objectively, he was perhaps in his mid-forties, but every one of those years was etched into his features with fatigue and grief. “I’ll leave that in your hands, my friend.”

His companion snapped around to stare at him.. “Wait. What do you mean, Wen Fang?”

(*Wei Wuxian started, the constant snarl of the mass of resentment that had been Jiang Cheng momentarily fading with his shock. Wen Fang? The same young A’Fang from Yiling?*)

“Someone has to keep the great houses and lords from killing each other and starting this mess all over again. And apparently that’s me.” Under the dry humor was calm resolve. “And that means Wen Fang can’t exist anymore. The Sunshot Campaign, the Turmoils, *this*... The sects have done too much damage. No one will *trust* a cultivator to rule them.” He slanted a pointed look at his companion. “Which you also know perfectly well, Jin Rulan.”

(*…Rulan? Shijie’s Rulan?*)

*YOU DARE **YOU DARE** not true **not her son*** her *son **wouldn’t***

The younger man winced. “…your point is taken,” he said reluctantly. “But my son will carry on my name. You…”

“I have cousins who survived. They can carry on the Wen name. But I must remain Yang Jian – just as you are Liu Zhixian,” Wen Fang – *Yang Jian* – said, before hesitating. “But… I think, perhaps, I might use Wén as a reign name. It’s not the same, but… an acknowledgement, of sorts.”

***DIE die** die die...*

Exhaling slowly, Wei Wuxian slid out of the Empathy trance, anchoring himself back in the present world. Empathy was always disorienting, with the total immersion in the memories of another. And Jiang Cheng’s ghost was so *old*, fragmented by absorbing the resentment of so many other ghosts over the centuries. There was so little left…

Not even a *self*, really. Just an empty, inchoate *loss* buried beneath layer upon layer of rage and resentment and desperate denial—

A clear, familiar tone. And a familiar voice, physical and real, calling. "*Wei Ying!*"

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and watched as the corroded remnant of Sandu disintegrated away into dust, the rage and resentment and suppressed regret fading at last.

It certainly hadn't been in the time or manner Jiang Cheng had wanted… but in the end, Wei Wuxian *had* come back.

Already, he could feel the change in the resentful energy pooled in the lake; with the ghost at its core gone, the abyss had fragmented into many disjointed pieces, and the very air around them felt lighter as a result. Granted, that wouldn't last; with this much energy in one place, it wouldn't take very long at all for a new abyss to form. Cleansing it all would take a very long time.

Not to mention that, with the ancient flag formation disintegrating under the erosion of the dam, the myriad of resentful ghosts and beasts that had gathered over the centuries was going to start spreading out again. On the other hand, with the formation disintegrating, the disruption to the dragon lines would correct itself, and training new cultivators would get a lot easier. So… it all came out even, he supposed?

Huffing, Wei Wuxian opened his eyes and found four worried faces staring at him. Wen Yuan was crouching next to him, Wei Wuxian's clarity bell chiming in his hand, while Lan Wangji knelt at his left, still clutching Bichen's hilt with a white-knuckled grip. Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling were a few steps back, white-faced and shocky and looking thoroughly drenched, although the rain was already easing, the clouds overhead beginning to open up.

"He's gone," he assured them.

And then flopped back onto the wet pavement with a *very* loud sigh.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji's voice was not alarmed, but it was very clear that he was *ready* to be!

Wei Wuxian looked up at him. "Lan Zhan, can we go home now?" he asked plaintively.

There was a breath that sounded like it might be a bit of a chuckle. Then Lan Wangji looked at one of the guards standing. "I know the situation is irregular," he said, in a weirdly polite way that made it clear that he might acknowledge that fact, but he wasn't *asking*, either.

The fellow who seemed to be the leader of the guards now that Jin Guangshan was a rather messy corpse looked at them, looked at his fellow guards – all still rather white-faced and wild-eyed, clearly they had not signed up for this sort of thing! – and then buried his face in his hands. "You know what? I don't even care," he said wearily, his voice muffled. "There will be questions, I assume we know where to find you, just *go*."

"Thank you," Lan Wangji said gravely.

Wen Yuan sighed. “It’s going to be a really long walk, though.” He looked out to the east, beyond the dam, and Wei Wuxian suddenly realized that the sky was paling to the platinum-and-gold of pre-dawn. Had it really been that long? “At least it’s not raining anymore.”

“Hey, why *did* it stop raining?” Lan Jingyi asked suddenly. “Because, I mean, that whole storm was really weird, right? It wasn’t just me imagining things?”

Wei Wuxian had to laugh. Granted, most cultivators didn’t have much experience with it, but… “The weather gets strange when there’s a lot of resentful energy active in one place,” he explained, shamelessly accepting Lan Wangji’s offered hand to pull himself back upright before equally shamelessly draping himself on the man’s shoulder.

What? It had been a long night! He deserved some indulgence!

“Wait,” Jin Ling said suddenly. “Are you seriously telling us that there’s an actual *physics* reason for fights against big scary monsters to happen on a dark and stormy night?!”

Wei Wuxian blinked and scratched his nose. “Huh… yes? Although it’s probably more philosophy-physics than *physics*-physics…”

Someone cleared their throat. “Gentlemen.”

Startled, they looked up. An older woman was standing in the doorway of the tour bus, smiling wryly.

“Given that I think we *all* have had quite enough for one day… may we offer you a ride down to town?”

“*Seriously, Lan Wangji, how could you* do *this to me?! I mean. Don’t get me wrong, the visuals are absolutely* epic *and the forums are going crazy… But this was not the plan!*”

There was a soft sound suspiciously reminiscent of someone slapping Nie Huaisang on the back of the head, and then Nie Mingjue asked, “*Are you safe for the time being?*”

“I believe so,” Lan Wangji said. “Madam Bao arranged rooms for us at a hotel.”

The elderly woman had, in fact, booked an entire *suite*, as well as making the arrangements so that none of them had to interact with the staff in person. Eventually, of course, they would have to brave the public again, but she had been quite confident that so long as they remained in their suite, no one would know where they were.

He’d offered to repay her. Madam Bao had waved him off. “I’ve made plenty of investments that have paid very well over the years, I can afford to indulge a few strapping young fellows who happened to save my life – a life I’m rather fond of, you know. Now go pour those poor teenagers of yours into a bed before you have to carry them yourself!”

“*And there is no one requiring immediate medical attention?*” Lan Qiren’s voice was brusque, but Lan Wangji could hear the concern in the fact that the man had asked at all.

“Scrapes, bruises. Some pulled muscles.” All of which had quickly made themselves known once the crisis passed. Luckily the bus had been equipped with a good first aid kit, and once everyone had showered, they had managed to rig together some cold compresses using the towels and ice from the machine down the hall. “Nothing more urgent than that.”

Which seemed almost miraculous, given what they’d faced. But he supposed that they had also, frankly, largely been in situations where if they had not escaped unhurt, they would not have survived at all.

“*Then I recommend you rest,*” Wen Qing said briskly. “*Xiao Xingchen, Song Lan and I should be there by tomorrow.*”

“*And me!*” Nie Huaisang insisted. “*Just, please, I’m begging you, if you somehow find* yet another *ancient monster to fight in the meantime, get a* proper *camera to record it, none of this handheld cellphone nonsense…*”

Huffing internally, Lan Wangji hung up. He did recognize, intellectually, that Nie Huaisang’s frivolous fretting was a cover for residual panic and possibly even genuine concern, but he was not in a mood to indulge the man.

He allowed himself a moment to breathe and settle himself, and then returned to the main room of the suite. “Wen Qing and Xiao Xingchen will be here by tomorrow.”

Wen Yuan sighed explosively. “Oh, thank goodness! I wasn’t sure how we were going to get home.”

Given that none of them had been carrying a wallet and Meng Yao had taken their phones – meaning they had either fallen into the lake, been swallowed by the Xuanwu, or lost in the wreckage of the helicopter – it was a legitimate concern.

“And, um… what about talking to the police?” Lan Jingyi asked, looking a little green at the thought. “Because. You know. Some people died. Granted they weren’t exactly *nice* people, but…” He darted a quick look at Jin Ling, who was picking at the remnants of the breakfast that room service had delivered, and quickly shut his mouth.

“Given that we now have irrefutable evidence that Jin Guangshan was involved with Xue Yang and the theft of antiquities,” in the form of *multiple* live-streamed videos that had, according to Nie Huaisang, gone viral in *seconds*, and picked up worldwide, “I believe it will be the responsibility of the task force to handle any investigation.”

He did not envy them. A high-level party official embroiled in organized crime, antiquities smuggling and mobilizing military resources for the purposes of kidnapping several high-profile individuals was complicated enough without adding the problem of an ancient giant monster and possession by a ghost. There would be questions, undoubtedly – but he trusted Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan to handle them.

Wen Yuan drooped in relief, then turned his attention to Wei Wuxian, who was checking his qi to see if the storm of resentful energy had done any harm to the boy’s developing

meridians. The cultivator was the one person in their group who did not have the glassy-eyed, shocky look of someone simultaneously too exhausted and too wound up to sleep.

Then again, Wei Wuxian had gotten onto the bus, claimed a seat next to Lan Wangji, and promptly curled up against Lan Wangji's shoulder and napped the entire ride down to Sandouping. He hadn't opened his eyes again until it was time to get off.

Granted, it was said that you could recognize a soldier by the ability to sleep anywhere, at any time, at the drop of a hat. But it was… gratifying, to know that Wei Wuxian considered Lan Wangji a safe harbor when he needed rest.

Although Lan Wangji suspected the long nap had also been a strategic decision in order to evade prying questions from an entire bus full of *very* curious and overstimulated tourists. If it were, he would not blame the man *at all*.

Even if part of him wished he could have observed Wei Wuxian's reaction to the cooing of certain teenage girls who clearly had a taste for danmei.

There had also been many, many pictures taken. Some surreptitiously. Others very much *not*.

At least they had been respectful enough of Wei Wuxian's space that they hadn't disturbed the man's sleep. And in the face of Wen Yuan and Lan Jingyi jointly pleading, everyone on the bus had agreed to grant them…

Well. Not *privacy*, exactly. That would have been impossible, given that the entire confrontation at the dam had been live-streamed from multiple devices. At least one intrepid videographer had apparently even caught their descent from the sky, linked together in a desperate daisy chain as Suibian fought to slow their fall.

According to Nie Huaisang, it was *very* dramatic. Lan Wangji was determined to never, ever watch that particular video. Living through it had been bad enough.

Still. The livestreams were unleashed on the world, a genie with no intention of returning to the bottle. But, at least as of Nie Huaisang's most recent feed, none of the photos from the bus ride had been posted, and none of the tourists were talking, either.

It wouldn't last, of course. But… it was enough for him to hope against hope that the reprieve would at least last long enough for them to return to the familiar sanctuary of Cloud Recesses before the storm broke.

Especially Jin Ling, who had been through far too much already. There was no way the boy would escape the fallout entirely, but he at least should have friendly faces around him when it came. Not the staring and gossip of bystanders. Even within their hotel suite… well. The normally hot-tempered boy was uncharacteristically quiet, and his picking at the remains of breakfast seemed more an excuse to avoid making eye contact with anyone than hunger.

He would have to talk to someone. He'd been betrayed and used by Meng Yao, someone he'd trusted, and at the bidding of the man who was his legal guardian and sole living relative. (Absent any other illegitimate children of Jin Guangshan, which was its own emotional

minefield.) And both Meng Yao and Jin Guangshan had died violently last night. Small wonder Jin Ling had effectively hidden himself in Wei Wuxian's shadow, even if he would probably bristle at the suggestion he was *hiding*.

For that matter, all of the boys would probably benefit from talking to someone, given that they'd been exposed to lethal violence in multiple manifestations over the course of the night. Lan Wangji would not be averse to it, himself.

Wei Wuxian finally nodded in satisfaction and released Wen Yuan's wrist. Then he grinned and poked the boy's nose. "Well, you didn't do yourself any harm with all that, at least! But you should meditate before you sleep. That was a *lot*!" He looked pointedly at the other two. "In fact, you all should."

Lan Jingyi groaned, but it was clear that his heart wasn't in it. "As long as I get to sleep after…"

Rubbing his wrist, Wen Yuan glanced carefully up at Wei Wuxian. "Um. Can I ask something?"

Wei Wuxian huffed. "You've been asking things for months!" The laughter in his voice took any sting out of the words. "You can ask anything, I just might not answer."

Wen Yuan wrinkled his nose and rolled his eyes at the familiar teasing, then forged onward. "When Jin Guangshan – or, well, I guess maybe it was the ghost – he called you *Yiling Laozu*…"

Wei Wuxian groaned dramatically, casting an imploring look at the ceiling. "I don't know *who* came up with that ridiculous title. When I find out, I'm going to drag them back from the dead to give them a piece of my mind!"

Wen Yuan stared. "But… it really was *your* title. You actually *are* the original Yiling Laozu."

Oh. Lan Wangji blinked. In the chaos, he'd completely missed the implications of that frustrated rant.

The cultivator made a face. "Only under protest!" he complained, before raising a finger. "And given what's happened to all the *other* stories about people from the cultivation sects, I suspect your stories aren't exactly accurate."

"I dunno. Kinda seems like the bit about defeating a *giant cursed monster* was pretty close," Lan Jingyi said.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, hesitated, then made a face. "Less *defeated* and more *didn't die*," he said, reluctantly amused. "And that happened *years* before the whole silly title!"

"Wait…" Lan Jingyi's brow furrowed. "If it was *years* before… you're not that old! Are you saying that the last time you fought that thing, you were *our* age?!"

Wei Wuxian gave him a dry look. "Believe me, it was not my idea," he said wryly. "And I had much more training than you!"

“In the stories, you – or, well, Yiling Laozu was an immortal living at the source of the Yangtze, and before he became Emperor Wen, Yang Jian sought him out for secret knowledge in his quest to unify China,” Wen Yuan said.

Wei Wuxian blinked, then laughed sheepishly. “Ah. Well. Ironically, that’s a bit more accurate than your histories, even if the details are all muddled! He rubbed his nose. “I don’t *think* I’m immortal! But… I did help out the remnants of the Wen sect a bit. And it seems they used that to help seal the ghost from last night, and that was part of founding the Sui. So… sort of correct, I suppose?”

“Who *was* that ghost, anyway?” Lan Jingyi asked suddenly. “I mean, he was talking like he knew you…”

“Ah.” Wei Wuxian’s smile was slightly crooked. “He was a sect leader from my time. He… hmmm.” He pursed his lips, frowning slightly. “He lost someone, and wanted revenge. Then he was killed, but he was still angry, so… he kept going. And there were so *many* angry dead back then. It… hm. Snowballed, I think is the term.”

Lan Wangji kept his face blank, but he frowned internally, concerned. He knew the story had to be more complicated than that. Among other things, Wei Wuxian hadn’t needed to stop and *think* about his words like that for some time. He was stalling.

And he’d called the ghost *Jiang Cheng*.

Wen Yuan winced. “So… it was like that Red Army ghost. He wasn’t just *him* anymore, he was the core of a whole *lot* of anger that couldn’t *go* anywhere.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “We were lucky the ring was removed from the seal. With a piece of the ghost separated from the abyss, that part of the ghost became… a little bit more of what he was. It was possible to reach him and liberate him.”

“And when that piece liberated… it was like the oracle bones. The rest of him went with, and that took the core out of the abyss?” Wen Yuan asked.

“Pretty much,” Wei Wuxian agreed, and grinned wryly. “Really… as liberations go, that was a remarkably simple one.”

“…because my grandfather was stupid enough to go carrying a piece of the ghost around with him,” Jin Ling said bitterly, fidgeting with something under the table. Then, more hesitantly, he added, “So… all the stuff he was doing. Was that… was that *just* the ghost?”

“I mean… must’ve been, right?” Lan Jingyi insisted. “Some of the stuff he was doing… it just didn’t make *sense*! It was like he thought he could just… go out and do whatever he wanted and drag people off and no one would say boo!”

“It was likely both,” Wei Wuxian said, surprisingly gently. “The longer Jin Guangshan carried the ring, the more the lines between him and the ghost would have blurred. You saw it, didn’t you? When he came out, he *acted* as Jin Guangshan, even if his judgement was off.”

“And he had that ring for a *year*,” Wen Yuan said with a wince.

“Wonder how Jin Guangshan got it in the first place, though,” Lan Jingyi mused. “You think he got too close and it kinda… One Ring of Doom’d him into picking it up?” A second later he blanched, mouth snapping closed as his eyes darted towards Jin Ling.

Jin Ling snorted. “Please. It wouldn’t have *needed* to. He saw something rare and valuable and decided that it was his because he wanted it.” He crossed his arms, rolling his eyes – a disdainful demeanor that would have been much more convincing if not for the way his shoulders remained hunched. “He did stuff like that *all the time*. I think he got a kick out of it. Heck, this past year he’s been obsessed with some crazy genealogical thing, that’s why he bought the property in Wuhan, nevermind that no one *cares* anymore who you were related to three hundred years ago…”

Lan Wangji blinked, suddenly distracted. Jin Ling was clutching the item he’d been fidgeting with in one hand. Seen up close, it was a silver ball with a tassel of purple silk, not unlike…

Wen Yuan made a startled sound, leaning in for a closer look. “That looks like a clarity bell!”

“So it does,” Wei Wuxian murmured, face strangely still. He held out a hand. “May I?”

Surprisingly hesitant, Jin Ling handed it over, even as he said, “It’s just some old charm.”

Wei Wuxian hummed, turning the ball around in his fingers. “Jin Ling. Did your grandfather give this to you, or was it the ghost?”

Jin Ling’s eyes widened. “He said something about it being a family heirloom.” He blanched. “But he only gave it to me *after* he started wearing the ring…”

“Oh shoot. It’s not cursed too, is it?” Lan Jingyi demanded, sitting bolt upright.

Wei Wuxian laughed. “No, it’s not cursed. Wen Yuan is right – it is a Jiang clarity bell. It belonged to Jiang Yanli, once.”

Oh.

Jin Ling blinked. “Is that… someone you knew?” he asked, a hint of something that sounded like tentative hope slipping into his voice.

Wei Wuxian smiled. “She was my shijie,” he said, and the *warmth* in his voice said more than an entire treatise could – as well as *doing* things to Lan Wangji’s heart.

“The one who gave you the comb?” Lan Jingyi asked eagerly – then turned red, obviously realizing that he’d basically just admitted to eavesdropping on their conversation the other night.

Wei Wuxian gave him a toothy grin that said he had absolutely noticed the slip. “The same,” he confirmed, and handed the clarity bell back to Jin Ling. “You might like to know… an interesting thing about ghosts is, they can sense when people are related. If that ghost gave this to *you*… Jiang Yanli was his sister.”

Ah. Lan Wangji released a slow breath at the indirect confirmation of his suspicions. That *had* been the ghost of Jiang Wanyin.

Wen Yuan's eyes were huge. "Wait. So if he told Jin Ling that it was an heirloom, and it belonged to Jiang Yanli… Does that mean Jin Ling is her descendant?"

Jin Ling stared at the bell for a long minute, a whole series of complicated expressions flickering across his face, too fast to read. Then his shoulders slumped. "Great. So not only do I have *Jin Guangshan* for a grandfather and *Meng Yao* for an uncle, but I'm *also* stuck with a scary angry ancient ghost that tried to kill us for a who-knows-how-many-greats uncle. Why does my family tree suck so much?!"

Wei Wuxian huffed. "Shijie was one of the best people in the world, I'll have you know!"

Lan Jingyi blinked. "Um. Just gonna throw this out there, but… wouldn't that mean Wei Wuxian's *also* your who-knows-how-many-greats uncle?"

Jin Ling opened his mouth to respond, and then froze in his seat, eyes wide.

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Maybe not by blood. But… Shijie did claim me as family once. And… I'm glad to know her children survived."

Jin Ling closed his mouth, swallowing hard. "Even when that means Jin Guangshan was her descendant, too?"

"Eh." Wei Wuxian waved a dismissive hand. "I'll blame him on the Peacock." Grinning, he reached out and ruffled Jin Ling's hair. "Now, as your honorary uncle: have Wen Yuan show you how to do a cleansing meditation. That was a *lot* of resentful energy. Better to clear it off now than deal with nightmares later."

Lan Jingyi made a dismayed sound and scrambled to his feet. "Okay, I want in on that. Last night was nightmare fuel on its own, I don't want sticky ghost goo energy giving my brain ideas!"

That seemed to be taken as a signal. Getting up, Wen Yuan started chivvying his friends in the direction of the room they'd claimed. Ostensibly because it had enough beds for all of them, but Lan Wangji had a sneaking suspicion that Wen Yuan was going to borrow Wei Wuxian's tactics and build a blanket fort for them to all pile into together.

Assuming that they slept at all. He hoped they would at least try. It had been a very long day for all of them. Nightmares or no, they *needed* to rest.

Lan Wangji stepped over to the table, wrapping up and stowing away everything that looked intact enough to serve as sustenance for later; Madam Bao had assured him that she would be happy to cover any reasonable expenses until they could access their own funds again, but he did not want to abuse her generosity by being wasteful. Wei Wuxian helped himself to the bits and crumbs that were too scant to be worth saving as Lan Wangji tidied up, seemingly content to simply watch quietly.

Satisfied that the common area was in good order, Lan Wangji turned to him. “I would appreciate it if you would check me as well.” He didn’t *hurt*, exactly, but he’d been feeling… not off, but something like it, ever since they had boarded the bus and the last of the adrenaline-fueled narrow focus on survival had finally ebbed. He felt… too tired to move, and yet it seemed almost at a remove, as if he could simply will it away if he chose. The crash, he had expected. The second part… less so.

Wei Wuxian’s smile widened with mischief, and Lan Wangji knew what was coming well before the man fluttered his eyes and pretended to clutch at his chest. “Lan Zhan! How forward!” he cried, mock-scandalized. And then cackled cheerfully when Lan Wangji gave him a deadpan look, well aware that there was nothing forward or scandalous about such a request. But Wei Wuxian nodded, waving for Lan Wangji to lead the way through the door of the room they had claimed.

Although not without a moment of consternation on Lan Wangji’s part, because he had not quite considered the implications of the fact that this was meant to be a *family* suite. Hence the multiple room beds in the room for the children… and *one* bed in the master bedroom for the parents.

Although on second glance, the bed was… ridiculously oversized, and Lan Wangji couldn’t help thinking that their modest setup in the Jingshi, two separate beds separated by a privacy screen, was vastly more *intimate* than this monstrosity. He very much was looking forward to their return home.

Although he couldn’t help the fond amusement when Wei Wuxian gaped at the bed, poked it curiously, and promptly did a belly flop just to laugh at the way he bounced. “Lan Zhan, did they mistake you for an emperor? Look at this thing! It’s bigger than your bedroom!”

“I suspect an emperor’s bed would be more modest,” Lan Wangji said dryly.

“Likely!” Wei Wuxian rolled over, arms and legs spread out in a vain attempt to reach the corners. “What are we even supposed to *do* with all this?”

“Sleep,” Lan Wangji deadpanned. And stuffed the suggestions for *other* potential activities into a box in the back of his mind and sat on them. Even if such a proposition would not be highly inappropriate, he didn’t have the energy for such activities right now. Nor any inclination to pursue them when there were *children* in the next room!

Wei Wuxian laughed, kicking his legs up and using the momentum to bounce himself off the mattress and up to a seated position. Holding his hand out to Lan Wangji, he wiggled his fingers expectantly.

Unfortunately, the room didn’t have any nearby chairs, and the ones it did have were too heavy to move easily and much lower than the height of the bed. So Lan Wangji sat on the edge of the mattress instead – feeling absurdly like an awkward teenager – and let Wei Wuxian take his wrist. Resting his fingers over the pulse point, Wei Wuxian closed his eyes for a moment—

And then he *smirked*.

Lan Wangji eyed him warily. That didn't *seem* to be a bad sort of smirk, but given the man's mercurial sense of humor, he felt some caution was justified. "Wei Ying?"

Still smirking, Wei Wuxian patted his hand. "Congratulations. Your jindan has formed."

Lan Wangji froze. His first, wild thought was that it was a joke – but this was not something that Wei Wuxian would joke about.

But… *how*?! Forming a golden core was supposed to take years of dedicated effort and training – not two months!

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "In a way, you were preparing yourself for it before we ever met!" he explained, obviously having anticipated Lan Wangji's confusion. "Your studies, your Tai Chi, your meditation… Your meridians were strong already. What we've been doing was mostly building the foundation and teaching you how to gather your qi. And then… you were meditating in the helicopter, weren't you?"

Lan Wangji blinked. "I was," he admitted. As much for something to do and to keep himself ready to respond at any moment, but…

Wei Wuxian nodded. "That happens sometimes. Stress can focus your qi, so if you are *ready* for the next step but not quite *there* yet…" He grinned. "You were almost there. And then, on the helicopter, we were moving *with* the pull of the formation, so it wasn't interfering anymore. It was just enough." His eyes were sparkling. "It's an *itty bitty* thing. Just a seed. But it's there."

Lan Wangji rested a hand over his third dantian. "I… was not sure if it was actually possible," he admitted. "The lore that survived claimed that it wasn't, if you only began as an adult."

Wei Wuxian snorted. "Oh, the sects said that, too."

Lan Wangji blinked, then frowned at him. "You said…"

"Ah!" Wei Wuxian raised a finger. "Think about it, Lan Zhan! If grown adults couldn't form a core, then we never would have learned that core formation was possible – you wouldn't have *children* training themselves that way!"

Lan Wangji paused to consider that. "But if it *is* possible…"

Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. "Well. Once the sects were led by *clans*, most cultivators did start as children. And it is *easier* as a child. If only because you have no other responsibilities!"

Ah. "But if you were accepted into a sect as an adult, or even an older teenager… it would be because you proved yourself useful to the clan. And you would be expected to *continue* being useful. You wouldn't have the freedom to dedicate yourself to cultivation alone."

Doubtless there *was* a concrete difference if you began early, while the body was still developing – just as there was for any kind of athlete. But… given that Wei Wuxian had

admitted that he could use cultivation to enhance his language acquisition, it was entirely possible that similar skills could be applied to core formation itself.

Even for language learning – yes, there was a critical period for language acquisition in early childhood. But the limits of *adult* language acquisition, while real, tended to be exaggerated by situational factors like a lack of immersion or artificial learning environments.

“Is that how I was able to summon Bichen?” he asked, fighting the urge to flex his hand. He could still feel the phantom weight of the hilt pressing against his fingers.

Wei Wuxian hummed thoughtfully, tapping his chin. “It definitely helped,” he agreed. “I don’t think you could have pulled that off without it! But…” He pursed his lips. “May I look at Bichen again?”

Lan Wangji blinked, but nodded. Standing, he went to the dresser where he had stowed the few things they had been able to salvage from the helicopter. It wasn’t much. They themselves had been taken with only what they’d been wearing, and as previously noted, their cellphones had been confiscated and lost. His laptop, unfortunately, was a loss as well; he’d spotted it lying underneath the smoldering remains of the helicopter, thoroughly shattered by the impact. It was possible that a skilled technician might have been able to salvage the data, but he’d been disinclined to risk electrical shocks and who knew what sort of toxic fumes trying to retrieve it. Fortunately, he’d been in the habit of creating backups regularly, so the only data he’d lost was from the previous day. It was fortunate that Meng Yao had been in such a hurry; it didn’t seem like he’d bothered to take Lan Wangji’s handwritten notes.

(He’d already claimed the hotel’s complimentary notepad to write up his account of the past twelve hours to add to those notes.)

Suibian’s scabbard, unfortunately, had been lost, and Lan Wangji was not looking forward to the outcry and recriminations that would follow when word of *that* reached certain ears. He suspected that it had fallen into the lake when they’d been thrown out of the helicopter, in which case it might be retrievable… but who knew what the bed of the reservoir looked like now, after the Xuanwu’s activity. And demise.

Granted, that wasn’t the only thing likely to raise a hue and cry, Lan Wangji thought darkly, eyeing the seemingly innocent piece of worked silver lying in the drawer with their other salvaged items. They probably shouldn’t have taken the Three Gorges Ring with them when they’d left the scene… but in their defense, Jin Ling had been so deeply in shock that he hadn’t even realized he was still clutching it in his fist until they were almost halfway to town.

He’d very nearly flung it out the window the moment he realized what he was holding, and part of Lan Wangji wished that he had. But it *was* an important artifact… and, frankly, while Wei Wuxian claimed that the ghost had passed on and the ring was no danger anymore, Lan Wangji had to admit that he felt better knowing that their only living expert on ghosts and curses was keeping an eye on it. Just in case.

Although… when the ring had been on Jin Guangshan's hand, it had gleamed brilliantly, beyond what he might expect from mere polished silver. But in the time between then and when Jin Ling had remembered what he was holding, the silver had tarnished to black. Far too fast for any natural process… which made him tentatively hopeful that Wei Wuxian was correct.

Still, he very deliberately avoided making any contact with it as he lifted Bichen out of the drawer and carried it over to the coffee table occupying the other end of the room.

Wei Wuxian met him there, accepting the sword gently with both hands when Lan Wangji offered it. He hefted it lightly for a moment, face thoughtful as though he was weighing more than the physical object.

Then he grinned.

"I thought as much," he chuckled. "I told you, Lan Yi was *stubborn*. And she loved her clan."

Lan Wangji hesitated. "You mean… a remnant of her may have lingered. And chose to help?"

Wei Wuxian frowned slightly. "More… I mentioned that spiritual weapons bond with their wielder. They pick up… I'm not sure you could call it a *personality* – it's not like they *think* exactly. But they tend to become *like* their wielder. You're a young Lan cultivator with a newly formed core, you were in danger…" He shrugged. "If a sword can make it so that no one but their wielder can use them, why not make it easier as well?" Then he grinned. "I did say Lan Yi would have liked you!"

Hm. Lan Wangji personally thought that the danger to *Wei Wuxian* had probably played a role as well. Although if so, he certainly didn't disapprove of Lan Yi's priorities.

But he wasn't going to debate it. Not when he'd been offered a perfect opportunity to address the topic that had been eating away at him since the sword from the reservoir had crumbled.

"Bichen is not the only remnant of those you once knew that was in play last night," he observed.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian's face went tellingly blank. Then he huffed a sigh, shaking his head. "Ah! I should have expected you to notice that." His shoulders slumped slightly, betraying the weariness behind his usual cheer. "Yes. The ghost was Jiang Cheng."

Lan Wangji waited, trying to project quiet, undemanding interest, as if this were nothing more than another afternoon conversation about the history of the sects. Although he made no effort to retrieve the notepad and pen from the small desk; this was too personal for that.

Wei Wuxian smiled ruefully. "It seems that Jiang Cheng didn't take my disappearance very well at *all*," he said ruefully. "He took it even less well when the Jin sect leader admitted to sending assassins." His lip quirked. "Which is at least one mystery solved!"

One mystery solved. As if the implications were simply irrelevant, as if they had no more meaning than simply filling in a minor gap in his memory.

“They’d already poisoned Jiang Cheng by then,” Wei Wuxian continued, and grimaced. “Telling him about what they did to me – well, what they thought they’d done! – was just… gloating.” He snorted, and shook a finger at Lan Wangji. “Let that be a lesson, Lan Zhan! Gloating at a defeated enemy is stupid. Don’t do it.”

Lan Wangji could fill in the rest of the story easily enough. He was well versed in the psychology of displacement anger – having been prone to it himself when he was younger and less settled in himself. It was not hard to picture that seething resentment only becoming stronger despite, *because of*, the fact that it had proven unfounded.

And the thing about resentment and rage and hate was, they weren’t diffused by the addition of a new target. They would just expand to fill the available space.

He wondered if the Jin sect leader had survived the choice to gloat. He suspected not. Just as he also suspected that it hadn’t been nearly enough to appease the ghost. Nothing ever was, when the resentment was only ever a mask for something else.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head. “Although… I wonder if they *meant* for him to become a ghost.”

Lan Wangji blinked, and then considered that. “You said once that the sects would not accept the Jin as leaders without a threat to force them to unify again. You think they were attempting to engineer such a threat?”

“It’s possible. Although if they were, it backfired rather badly!” Wei Wuxian smiled wryly. “So in the end, it *was* a ghost who brought the Chen down – or rather, the Jin, and the other sects with them. And when they used my flag formation to trap him…”

“The side effects meant that the survivors were unable to train new cultivators to recover from their losses,” Lan Wangji concluded quietly.

It seemed… almost too pat. Too neat. But that was with the benefit of hindsight. And… how many other historical miracles and catastrophes had come about in a similar manner – a perfect storm of timing and personalities and circumstances that seemed vanishingly improbable from a historical perspective?

He let out a slow breath and looked at Wei Wuxian. “That must be hard for you,” he said. “To learn that your companion and fellow cultivator became such a destructive ghost.”

To his surprise, Wei Wuxian laughed a little, although there wasn’t much humor in it. “Hard? Maybe,” he said. “Really, the *hard* part is that it’s so easy to believe. The seeds were always there.”

Lan Wangji hesitated. “I know your relationship with him was complicated,” he said carefully. Wei Wuxian had never said as much in so many words, but Lan Wangji had been able to read it in the gaps of *how* he said things. And the things he hadn’t said.

Wei Wuxian pouted at him. “Lan Zhan! Gossip was against the Lan sect rules, you know! Are you going to be a rebel, just because you were born fifteen hundred years late?”

Lan Wangji waited patiently. Under normal circumstances, he would have enjoyed the invitation to play verbally – and, perhaps, delighted in the implication that Wei Wuxian would have liked to have known him before. But he had learned to recognize deflection when he heard it.

He wouldn't push. But he didn't want to let himself be sidetracked from something so important. So he waited. If Wei Wuxian truly didn't wish to speak, he wouldn't.

Sometimes he wondered where the man had learned this habit of… testing, of always offering people an out rather than truly hearing his thoughts.

Because after only a few moments of expectant quiet, Wei Wuxian huffed, one corner of his mouth quirking in a wry smile. Handing Bichen back to Lan Wangji, he turned and walked over to the window.

"Jiang Cheng's sword was called *Sandu*," he said.

Lan Wangji considered that as he set Bichen down on the coffee table, taking care to avoid scratching the surface. It gave him time to turn over the implications of those words in his mind.

"The three poisons of Buddhism. Expressing the intent to master the three poisons as he mastered the sword," he concluded. "But if he became an angry ghost… ultimately, the poisons mastered him."

Wei Wuxian smiled crookedly. "Better maybe to say that rather than mastering them, he *wielded* them. During the war… his injury meant that he couldn't *wield* Sandu, but he always carried it with him. People took to calling him *Sandu Shengshou*."

Implying he'd mastered the poisons as one might master a *skill*. Probably not the form of mastery that the one who had named the sword had been thinking of.

Wei Wuxian sighed, leaning against the edge of the window as he looked out. The sun was long risen by now, painting the cityscape of Sandouping with warm morning light and catching in the light gauzy privacy curtains to create a touch of glow, offset by the deep shadows of the blackout curtains that had been pushed to the side. "I think," he said quietly, "that ultimately, the problem was that Jiang Cheng loved. But he wouldn't *admit* that he loved… because nothing was ever enough to convince him that he was loved *back*."

"*There are no guarantees*," Lan Wangji murmured. "*From the viewpoint of fear, none are strong enough. From the viewpoint of love, none are necessary.*"

Wei Wuxian blinked, then chuckled ruefully. "Well. That does sum it up rather well!" He shook his head. "And… Jiang Cheng was always afraid. Of not being loved. Of not being *enough*." He made a face. "It definitely didn't help that every time Madam Yu said he was lacking, she compared him to *me*."

Lan Wangji mentally winced. That was a combination that would poison even a healthy relationship, let alone one that was also tied up in rank and duties and issues of class and

status. In fearing rejection and abandonment, Jiang Wanyin would have looked for the signs of it at every turn. And in looking for it, he would inevitably convince himself he had found it, and seek to punish it… and thus turn fear and insecurity into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To have embedded that resentment into his sense of self, and then learn that Wei Wuxian's disappearance had been due to the machinations of others, others Jiang Wanyin had worked with as peers…

Well. The cognitive dissonance alone would likely have been enough to trigger a mental breakdown.

"That was why you let the sword strike at you," he realized. "His resentment was born of two conflicting impulses. You created a situation where they would turn against each other… and so doing, vanquish themselves."

"…You make it sound so heroic, Lan Zhan." Wei Wuxian's lips twitched ruefully, and for a moment Lan Wangji could see the grief within that smile. An old grief – older, he thought, than the weeks that had passed since Wei Wuxian had learned that time had stolen away the world he'd known. "Really… I think, in the end, Jiang Cheng was always his own worst enemy. Becoming a ghost just made it more obvious." He snorted. "Although Madam Yu certainly didn't help!"

Lan Wangji hesitated. "Madam Yu?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian blinked, then chuckled. "Ah – Jiang Cheng's mother." Correctly interpreting Lan Wangji's confusion, he explained, "She didn't let us call her Madam Jiang, so."

Lan Wangji blinked. "That is… an interesting choice. Was that common, for female cultivators?"

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Not at all! But no one wanted to argue with her about it." He sighed, shaking his head. "She was… not a happy person. Sometimes it seemed like she didn't *want* to be happy. It was more that she was simply angry – not at anything, just *angry* – and looking for excuses to take it out on people. Especially with Zidian!"

Lan Wangji felt his eyes widen involuntarily. "She drew her sword on her own disciples?" Although… rejecting the title of Madam Jiang might well imply she didn't consider them *her* disciples.

Wei Wuxian blinked, then laughed sheepishly. "Ah, no. Zidian is Jiang Cheng's ring." He nodded towards the dresser. "It belonged to Madam Yu originally. It was a spiritual weapon; it became a whip when the wielder wanted it to."

There was a great deal to unpack in that, but suddenly Lan Wangji could only stare at Wei Wuxian, remembering layer upon layer of laceration scars. "She used it on you."

Wei Wuxian laughed. "Every chance she got! I spent *hours* kneeling in the ancestral shrine waiting for Jiang-zongzhu to let me out when she was done."

Lan Wangji stared. “But *why*?”

Wei Wuxian blinked at him, amused. “Ah, Lan Zhan! You know me. I make trouble like I *breathe*. I don’t even remember half of the things I was punished for!” His smile softened then. “I told you. She didn’t need reasons. Just an excuse. That was all it really was.”

That was all? As if years of scars were simply nothing? “It was not right,” Lan Wangji said, voice tight. And yes, he was aware that attitudes towards corporal punishment had changed drastically in recent decades – had been caned himself once or twice as a child. But the casual violence that Wei Wuxian spoke of… even fifteen hundred years ago, it would have been a violation of proper conduct by a superior to a subordinate!

Wei Wuxian chuckled, warm and fond in a way that would make Lan Wangji blush if he weren’t so upset. “Ah, you really are too good, Lan Zhan.”

“Wei *Ying*.”

Wei Wuxian smiled at him. “I know it wasn’t right or fair. As I said: she only wanted a *target*. It didn’t matter what I did; if she was angry, she would *make* a reason to punish me, so why bother trying to appease her in the first place?” He chuckled. “But why trouble over it now? Life with the Jiang wasn’t *bad*! I had food, and friends, and a home. If there were problems – well, problems were everywhere!” He shrugged. “I told you – I learned a long time ago that there’s no point in clinging to the bad things that happen. You only harm yourself in the end. All that was fifteen hundred years ago! Why let it darken what I choose to do *now*?”

Lan Wangji deliberately unclenched the tightness in his shoulders, trying not to let it show. That… easy willingness to let bygones be bygones? He didn’t think he could be capable of that. He could barely wrap his mind around the concept.

But then again, he’d spent much of his life looking back on the past. And he certainly couldn’t say that he didn’t hold grudges.

But Wei Wuxian wasn’t him, and under the circumstances… Lan Wangji couldn’t blame him for wanting to focus on the future.

Which did raise a question. “Regarding that. Have you thought any more about what you would like to do?” he asked.

Wei Wuxian hummed. “Well. That array by the dam will definitely need cleaning up!” he said cheerfully. “It’s not an abyss anymore, at least, but it could easily *become* one again if something goes wrong. Dealing with that will keep me busy for a while!”

“Will you move to Hubei, then?” Lan Wangji asked, carefully neutral. He knew, intellectually, that Wei Wuxian could hardly stay hidden away in Cloud Recesses for the rest of his life. It was just… easier not to think about that, before.

But to his surprise, Wei Wuxian huffed, shaking a finger at him. “And leave you and all my cute little students? If I *must* be stuck with a ridiculous title like *Laozu*, I at least want to earn it properly!” He tilted his head. “And, really, until that flag array is taken care of, there aren’t

many places I *could* train new cultivators. It will be a while before I'm ready to actually start a sect, anyway."

Oh. Lan Wangji tried not to be too obvious in his relief. "I will be happy to assist you in that, if you like," he offered.

Wei Wuxian pursed his lips, then suddenly shook his head. "You know," he said, seeming to aim the comment not towards Lan Wangji directly but to the room as a whole, "I *was* going to be patient and wait and see… but all things considered, I don't think people will give us that much time. So."

Turning, he stepped forward, closing the distance between them too fast for Lan Wangji to draw back, so he was looking directly into Lan Wangji's face.

"Lan Zhan, I *like* you," he said pointedly.

Lan Wangji froze. Was he…

Wei Wuxian huffed. "This is very annoying, you know. I don't actually know the proper words for saying this sort of thing now! And I *know* your courting customs are very different."

Oh. He was.

Lan Wangji swallowed. "You said you were… open to having a cultivation partner. If it was a genuine partnership."

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Is one being offered?"

Well. That… made him fairly certain that no, he was not misinterpreting.

Even so, he very carefully telegraphed every movement as he raised a hand, giving Wei Wuxian ample opportunity to move away.

He didn't. In fact, he leaned in as Lan Wangji cupped his cheek, so close that despite their very similar heights, he had to look up just a little to meet Lan Wangji's eyes. Which put him at a perfect angle for Lan Wangji to lean in and—

The door opened. "Professor Lan, do you know where…"

Lan Wangji could *hear* the double-take.

"*Um.* I'll, um, just see myself out! Don't mind me! Just – go do what you were doing!"

The door quickly closed again – but was not actually thick enough to muffle Wen Yuan's breathless, "Jin Ling! Jingyi! *It's happening!*"

…at which point Lan Wangji discovered that it was very difficult to kiss someone who was laughing so hard.

Sighing, he gave up the attempt and simply let Wei Wuxian lean against him, burying his face in Lan Wangji's shoulder as he cackled gleefully. Which wasn't at all bad, as consolation prizes went, but…

"I'm going to kill them," he grumbled, only *mostly* for show.

Wei Wuxian snickered and straightened. "Ah, Lan Zhan! You're not thinking long-term, here!"

Lan Wangji raised a pointedly dubious eyebrow. "Oh?

Wei Wuxian grinned. "Consider: we now have an excuse to embarrass them in public for the rest of their adult lives!"

Very well. That was acceptable.

For such a chaotic beginning, this was an *excellent* day.

OMAKE:

Lan Wangji: I wish I could observe Wei Wuxian's reaction to the danmei fangirl squee…
Wei Wuxian: Hm. Lan Wangji's ears are very red, but he doesn't seem upset by what they're implying. Data!

AUTHOR: I'm sorry, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan! But the timeline switch means that for Jin Ling to be a descendant, Jin Guangshan would have to be as well! (Especially since his canon maternal family had to stay in Wei Wuxian's backstory…)

And for your amusement…
Me writing this: No, I can't do purple lightning in the storm, even though it's actually a real thing, that will give away the Jiang Cheng reveal!
Also me: the Jiang Cheng reveal is literally at *the end of this scene*, there's really no point to playing coy anymore.

(One of the best bits of writing advice I've ever read: don't worry too much about readers spotting the twist in advance. That's literally what foreshadowing is *for*. Done right, you ideally want the reader to go "oh" right before the characters do… but if they see it coming sooner? That means they were paying attention! And you don't lose the tension, because they're still waiting for the shoe to drop for the characters. Win win!)

NOTES:

A hat tip to the readers who spotted the Jiang Cheng ghost twist coming!

Fun side note: in some cultures, strong emotions are seen as a form of possession, since they make you do things that you would not otherwise do if you were calmer. So by a certain perspective, Jin Guangshan causes Jiang Cheng to be "possessed" in canon by egging on his insecurities and pride to get him to act contrary to his best interests. Sooo… turnabout is fair play, I guess?

And *another* noncorporeal antagonist went and made himself central to my plot. Clearly I need to just give in and accept that this is a Thing with my plotbunnies…

One of my favorite bits of world-building in MDZS is that MXTX gave us a *canonical justification* for battles against powerful resentful entities to be accompanied by *thunder and lightning*. So I took advantage! Granted, the canon version is that storms happen when two powerful resentful beings clash (hence the storm in Yunping when Wen Ning is fighting Nie Mingjue's corpse), but I figured that this was close enough. And honestly, I just think it's way too much fun to leave out!

When I started this story, I had a vague idea in my head about "Yiling Laozu" taking the role of a kind of cultivator-style Merlin. (Which is one of the reasons why I never got very specific about the legends; trying to find any one definitive story about Merlin is an exercise in frustration!) And then, while reading April Hughes's *Worldly Saviors and Imperial Authority in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*, I came across the account of Yang Jiang and Liu Zhixian. Historically, Liu Zhixian was a Buddhist nun who fostered Yang Jiang when he was young. Later, when Buddhism and Daoism were proscribed in the Northern Zhou by Yuwen Yong, Yang Jian and his wife took Liu Zhixian in and helped her continue practicing as a nun in secret – something that could have gotten them killed at the time. So for the purposes of this story – Yiling Laozu is remembered as a sage who helped train the future Emperor Wen, but the historical accounts conflated him with Liu Zhixian, one of Yang Jian's advisors. (And yes, there's a bit of gender flip thrown in.)

…and just a reminder that, as I said in the first chapter, this is not a reincarnation story. But since there's no reason for Jin Ling to have anything to do with the name Rulan, and I wanted to establish that Jiang Yanli did have a son, I borrowed it for what is essentially a one-scene OC…

But regarding the whole Yiling Laozu thing… Ever since his "where are my rivers of blood?" harrumphing in the first chapter, I have always read Wei Wuxian's internal voice as distinctly *sardonic*, especially when it comes to the whole Yiling Laozu thing. (And "Demon-Slaying Cave" is absolutely him making fun of the rumors!) So bunnies decided he should get a chance to snark for an audience, rather than just his internal dialogue!

And in this chapter, I finally sneak in a little bit of my "thumb-my-nose-at-cultivation-age-limits" agenda. Which, yes, I recognize is simply an inherent trope of the genre… but if you think about it, it's also a very classist sort of thing, because it limits access to cultivation to the people who can afford to have their children dedicate all their time to cultivating!

(And isn't it interesting that Lan Wangji, supposedly one of the best cultivators of his cohort, apparently has almost no responsibilities and can simply toss those responsibilities and go do secluded cultivation whenever he wants? After all, that's what he does right before Wei Wuxian leaves Cloud Recesses. Despite supposedly being in charge of discipline.)

…though, honestly? Given how popular the old "regressed to a child!" trope is, I want to see a story where the characters use it as a hack to get around critical development period limitations…

So. Jiang Cheng.

Whoo boy…

Jiang Cheng's appearance as a resentful ghost was one of the very earliest parts of the plot that I settled on for this story. It's based primarily on two things. The first was simply the thought that the Jiang Cheng we meet on Mount Dafan – in fact, throughout nearly the entire main story of the novel – is *ripe* to become a genuinely terrifying angry ghost. The man is a mass of seething rage and resentment fueled by his own emotional contradictions and insecurities. He's just still alive. In fact, that's one of the themes in the novel: while everyone talks about the dangers of resentful energy, it's the resentment of the *living* that's doing the most damage.

The other is… well.

Jiang Cheng willfully makes things worse for Wei Wuxian by going a step beyond simply saying he'd defected from Yunmeng Jiang to declare him *the enemy of the sects*. He leads the first siege on the Burial Mounds. He blames Wei Wuxian for his parents and Jiang Yanli despite knowing perfectly well that Wei Wuxian was not responsible. In the novel, it's solidly canon that he does take modao/guidao users (or, if we go with what Jin Ling says, people who remind him of Wei Wuxian) to Lotus Pier and tortures them ("beats them until they tell him what he wants to know" definitely qualifies for the term), given that the omniscient narrator goes into his head to show him *thinking it*; the account we're given in Yunping implies he kills them. He also tortures Wei Wuxian in Qinghe; what he does with Fairy is no different than locking someone who is claustrophobic in a closet, or forcing someone afraid of heights to walk on a cliff. He physically attacks Wei Wuxian for trying to walk away from a nasty encounter in the shrine at Lotus Pier.

And when the incredibly people-savvy Jin Guangyao needs to get an edge over Jiang Cheng at the temple in Yunping, he feints, not at Jin Ling, but at Wei Wuxian.

And Jiang Cheng falls for it.

I read Jiang Cheng as an absolute *mess* of contradictory impulses driven by insecurity and a toxic concept of how love is supposed to work, competitiveness warring against actual care against the influence of a mother who treated him more as a proxy for herself than an individual, all of it wrapped up in impulsiveness and a habit of defaulting to rage and violence rather than risking the slightest vulnerability – a behavior pattern he got from his mother as well.

As a side note here: given that Jiang Cheng is such a polarizing character, I'm going to make the same request here that I did for Lan Xichen: no rants about Jiang Cheng and how he's a horrible person in the comments, please… and also, please no essays about how really he actually cares so *much*.

He's *both*.

I think that may be part of why he's such a polarizing character. He is, inherently, contradictory… and because that's messy, people tend to latch onto one side of his character and explain away or dismiss the other.

Personally, I think a good way to understand Jiang Cheng is his title – which is why I worked it into the story, despite the AU elements meaning that he was coreless. Jiang Cheng is someone who clings to his attachments, his hatreds, and most of all his *illusions* – the Three Poisons (Sandu) of Buddhism. And rather than mastering them by overcoming them, he *wields* them as weapons.

Especially illusions. Because to me, one of the key characteristics of Jiang Cheng is that he lies to himself. Time and again, he says or does whatever is emotionally satisfying in the moment. And then he clings to it, because to do otherwise is to admit that he was wrong, and his pride and insecurities won't allow that.

Which can have devastating results.

When we see the sect leaders gather after Wei Wuxian rescues the Wens from the camp, Jiang Cheng actually does mention the debt he owes Wen Ning and Wen Qing… until Nie Mingjue mentions Yunmeng Jiang being destroyed again, and Jiang Cheng – who is already in a bad mood – starts *seething*. And then Jin Guangshan starts accusing Wei Wuxian of being disrespectful of Jiang Cheng, and by the time Jiang Cheng gets to the Burial Mounds, he's in a fury. He's *already* decided that he won't help, *because he's busy being offended*. At which point, when Wei Wuxian refuses to bow down to Jiang Cheng's demands, he essentially responds with a metaphorical, "*Fine!* Don't come crawling back to me! (I will *force* you to come crawling back!)"

And honestly, I think the reason that the rumor-mongering and whispers about *respect* and *status* are so effective ties into what might be the ultimate lie that Jiang Cheng tells himself, one that I think whetstonefires on Tumblr articulated the best: the relationship between Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian always existed in two registers. The first is the quasi-brotherly relationship. The second is that of lord and vassal.

Here's the problem: of the two, the first is the one Jiang Cheng wants – *needs*, desperately. That's the one that matters.

But his insecurity means that he only *acknowledges* the second.

Because that's the relationship where *he* has all the power. He doesn't have to make himself vulnerable by *asking*, he doesn't have to *reciprocate* anything! Which is why he harps so much on debts – which only really comes up *after* Wei Wuxian goes to help the Wens. Debts

mean he has *control*. Debts mean that Wei Wuxian *owes* him. Debts mean that Wei Wuxian *has* to stay as his vassal.

(Even if he has to lie to himself about the validity of those debts. And ignore his own.)

One of the really interesting ways to highlight this pattern is to look at what Wei Wuxian actually *said* in that famous promise, versus what Jiang Cheng *claims* that he said.

"*In the future, you'll be the sect leader, and I'll be your subordinate, like your father and my father. So what if the GusuLan Sect has its Two Jades? The Yunmeng Jiang Sect will have its Two Prides! So, shut up. Who said that you don't deserve to be the sect leader? Nobody can say this, even you can't either. If you do you're looking for a beating.*" (ExR 56)

"*Wei WuXian, who was the one who broke his promise and betrayed the Jiang Sect first? Tell me. That I'd be the sect leader and you'd be my subordinate, that you'd help me your whole life, that so long as the GusuLan Sect had its Two Jades, the YunmengJiang Sect would have its Two Prides, that you'd never betray me or betray the Jiang Sect—who was the one that said these?! I'm asking you—who was the one that said all these?! Did you eat all your fucking words?!*" (ExR 102)

Jiang Cheng took a promise of brotherhood, and turned it into one of *unilateral service*.

(And this is why learning about the golden core is so devastating. From a lord and vassal perspective, that is the *ultimate* act of loyalty. There is no debt that Jiang Cheng can claim which can top it. *He can't force Wei Wuxian back into the role of vassal*.)

And… honestly? I think that one-sided interpretation of the promise can be traced all the way back to Jiang Cheng's unhealthy relationship with loving and being loved, which goes all the way back to Madam Yu constantly hammering him with the idea that his father doesn't love him, something she was doing before Wei Wuxian ever arrived at Lotus Pier. So he easily believes people will be disloyal, and resorts to force to keep them.

And most of all, the fact that Madam Yu imparted to Jiang Cheng an absolutely *toxic* model of what love is supposed to look like.

If they don't agree with you, if they say you are wrong, they don't love you! (Madam Yu swooping in when Jiang Fengmian attempts to impart a lesson to Jiang Cheng.) *If they care about anyone else, they don't care about you!* (Madam Yu's twisting of any positive attention shown to Wei Wuxian.) *If you do things for them, it demeans you!* (Madam Yu attacking Jiang Yanli for gestures like peeling seeds for her family.)

And most poisonous of all?

Your father doesn't love you because you're my son!

Which means it's not about his actions, it's about who he *is*, and there's nothing he can do about that, it's not *his* fault… And so he never learns to temper his actions or check his habit of lashing out, verbally or physically, at whatever target is easiest. After all, that's *also* a behavior his mother patterned for him, and he's *her son*… and we're back to FLEAs.

Honestly? I think that there's a part of Jiang Cheng that is still a small child throwing tantrums, because Madam Yu never allowed him to have what he desperately *needed*: his father's love, and someone to sit him in a corner and make him think about what he did.

Which is a real problem when that small child is the driving force behind a fully grown man with the power of noble status and a sect and access to lethal weapons and nothing to check his behavior.

As I said in an earlier chapter: does he love Wei Wuxian? I think he does. And they would both have been better off if he didn't.

Honestly, I do think there's hope for Jiang Cheng at the end… but losing Wei Wuxian was a necessary step. Because behavior patterns like that don't change on their own. It's only after Jin Guangyao rubs Jiang Cheng's culpability in what happened to Wei Wuxian in his face that Jiang Cheng can see that he's repeating the pattern with Jin Ling, and stop himself.

This, by the way, is why I can't agree with people who say that Wei Wuxian telling Jiang Cheng about the core transfer would have fixed things. Because ultimately, Wei Wuxian's lack of a core and the guidao *had nothing to do* with the conflict that ultimately divided them. Nor would Wei Wuxian coming back have done more than put a patch on it. Jiang Cheng's insecurities still would have risen up, again and again, because fundamentally they have nothing to do with Wei Wuxian and his actions. Their roots are solidly in *Jiang Cheng's demons*.

It only works in this story because Jiang Cheng is a *ghost*. Ghosts only need to be appeased once.

But I think the tragedy of Jiang Cheng is, *it didn't have to be that way*. He could have been better. The seeds were there. *He cared*.

He pushed hard enough to make the journey from Mount Muxi to Lotus Pier and back in seven days, rather than the ten it should have taken. He tried to stop Madam Yu when he thought she was going to cut Wei Wuxian's hand off – and while he failed, the simple fact that he tried is genuinely significant when you consider how much control she has over him in every other scene. When he sees Wei Wuxian in danger, he sacrifices himself to lead them away.

And, bluntly, I don't think it *matters* if he didn't think they would actually do anything to him or not. Honestly, I don't think he *thought* at all. He saw the danger, and acted. That was a "who you are in the dark" moment.

Unfortunately, in the end (and rather the reverse of the usual way the trope plays out), it's who Jiang Cheng becomes *when he thinks people are watching* that wins out.

The line Lan Wangji quotes above comes from Emmanuel Teney: *There are no guarantees. From the viewpoint of fear, none are strong enough. From the viewpoint of love, none are necessary.*

In the end, Jiang Cheng's fear (his insecurities, his anger, his need to *blame*) was stronger than his love.

And that turns love into poison.

Chapter 25: Epilogue: Moving Forward

Chapter Summary

It's time to open the doors.

Chapter Notes

Bonus bibliography at the end!

Luo Qingyang gave herself just a moment to catch her breath and hike the strap of her bag into a more comfortable position after the long climb. Then she was hurrying after Wen Qing again, barely taking in the stately structures of the historic complex of Cloud Recesses in the dizzying realization that she was actually *here*.

Honestly, she'd mostly submitted her application on impulse, just to say she *had*... alright, and *maybe* because her husband had dared her to do it. It wasn't that she didn't have confidence in her abilities or her experience, but she was acutely aware that the Yiling Laozu project basically had their pick of anyone they wanted, including some of the top names in the field. She was good, but she was also only in her thirties, and female on top of that. There was no way they'd offer such a prestigious position to a relative nobody.

So she'd been completely blindsided when she'd been invited to an interview only two weeks after submitting her application.

Granted, the speed that the project was moving at made sense, once she was past the first shock. They'd come under a great deal of public attention and criticism, more than some of which was, in her opinion, justified. The scrutiny had become even more critical after the Three Gorges Incident. Still, she hadn't been expecting to go beyond the first interview after meeting Director Lan. She was all too familiar with old-school academics who valued academic appointments and papers published over experience.

And yet here she was, hurrying along after Wen Qing as the woman walked briskly across the campus.

"It's fortunate that things have calmed down somewhat," the doctor said, not even winded from the long climb up the stairs. "For a while, no one could come up here without a security escort."

“I can imagine,” Luo Qingyang admitted. The footage of the Three Gorges Incident had taken the world by storm, and by the time anyone official could react the hackers had already gone digging for answers – especially once people had pieced together bits of captured conversation from various livestreams to put together the accusations that the kids had thrown at Jin Guangshan.

Cloud Recesses hadn’t escaped unscathed, once word got out that there’d been a mole in their security forces on Jin Guangshan’s payroll. But the criticism had been relatively toothless – probably because the people best positioned to take advantage of it had been suddenly preoccupied with scrambling to shove various embarrassing skeletons back into closets. Apparently Jin Guangshan had kept his fingers in quite a few pies, and those pies had ended up all over more than a few faces.

Not to mention that some of the internet influencers who had been egging on the protests outside the university had turned out to be in Jin Guangshan’s pocket – or at least Meng Yao’s, acting as Jin Guangshan’s agent – as well. In some cases, apparently, they hadn’t even *known* that they were being used to put political pressure on the project – but once that got out, the protests had lost a great deal of momentum. It was hard to tell yourself that you were the good guy when it got out that you were being used to create a pretext for kidnapping. Between that and the fact that many of the protesters were students who had to return to their universities with the start of the school year, things had calmed substantially.

She sighed for a moment in relief as they passed out of the sun and into the shade of a wooded trail; the school year may have started, but summer wasn’t done with them yet, and she hadn’t expected how intense the sun would be up in the mountains. Then she lengthened her stride to catch up with Wen Qing. “Is it okay if I ask why you chose me?” she asked. “I know that other people with more experience must have applied. Was it because of what happened to me in high school?”

Bold, maybe. But she’d learned to be bold in her work, and more importantly, she was getting the feeling that it wasn’t considered a bad thing here.

To be honest, she’d hesitated to include that; it wasn’t something she normally talked about. But when she’d read the announcement and watched the video of Wei Wuxian waking up after *fifteen hundred years*… Well. She’d had more than a few unsettled dreams, recalling how disoriented she’d been after only a few months. It was part of why her husband had dared her to apply, actually – pointing out that, if nothing else, at least it might settle her head a bit.

Wen Qing glanced at her and tilted her head. “Partially,” she said, equally candid, and oh, Luo Qingyang had the feeling she was going to like this woman. “There are plenty of scholars with appropriate academic backgrounds. But you understand *dislocation* – both from your personal experience and your work with displaced populations.” She shook her head. “If we’re going to ask Wei Wuxian to spend his time revisiting what he’s lost, then the least we can do is make sure he’s working with someone sensitive to what that means.”

That was more or less what she’d guessed, although it was nice to know what they expected of her – and nicer that they were willing to say as much. “And the other part?”

To her surprise, a look of wry amusement flickered over Wen Qing's face. "You've lived in other cultures, and you've traveled extensively in the autonomous regions here. You know better than to expect him to fit into a narrow idea of what someone from China's past should be like." She chuckled. "More important, you've shown you're flexible. Believe me, that can be *very* important around him."

Well. *Cultivator*. Yeah. She could imagine.

Although Luo Qingyang did suspect that certain other forms of open-mindedness might be important as well. She *might* have a little bet going with her friends about the exact nature of Professor Lan Wangji's relationship with Wei Wuxian.

Then Wen Qing led her around a turn in the path that opened onto a beautiful set of pools in the shadow of a cliff… and two young men *walking on the water*. And Luo Qingyang abruptly had to admit that maybe she hadn't imagined quite *enough*.

One of them was unmistakably Wei Wuxian, although he was dressed like she'd expect of any university student. But that long tail of hair was unmistakable – as was the broad, mischievous grin as he paused his conversation with his companion to very deliberately point *down*.

Apparently the teenager who was with him hadn't actually noticed where they were – because he looked down, *yelped*, and then promptly dropped into the water with a splash.

Wei Wuxian laughed brightly, easily riding out the wave as if he were standing on a rocking boat, and then crouching down to look at his soaking companion. "So!" he said. "Would you like to learn how to do that *without* being tricked into it?"

The boy spluttered, scraping dripping bangs out of his face. "*Yes*!"

Stopping by the edge of the water, Wen Qing huffed loudly, fists on her hips. "If anyone gets hypothermia because you decided to do water-walking lessons on the Cold Springs rather than a *pool* like a sensible person, I refuse to be held responsible," she informed them. "Wen Yuan, get out of there. *You* don't have a golden core to act like an internal heater yet."

Wei Wuxian blinked innocently at her. And wasn't the only one, Luo Qingyang noted. There was a whole bevy of innocent expressions on the group of teenagers sitting off to one side, a mix of textbooks and snacks scattered on the grass around them. Right – the kids who'd been involved in the Three Gorges Incident had been given special dispensation on their schooling, since it flat-out wasn't *safe* for them to attend regular school anymore. Or probably more accurately, having them present would result in an administrative headache for the schools.

She was also being given an absolutely *piercing* look by golden eyes, as Professor Lan Wangji handed a towel to Wen Yuan as he sloshed his way out of the water – grinning despite the obvious chill – and then turned to approach them.

Luo Qingyang gave him her best professional smile, the one she used to help assure people that she wanted to hear what *they* had to say, not to use them as proxies for her own agendas. Although in the back of her mind, she was cackling just a *little* bit, because her friends back

home were going to be utterly beside themselves when they realized that she was going to be working with two *absolutely gorgeous* guys for months.

Look. She was married, but she could still appreciate delicious eye candy, okay?

Granted, some of that mental cackle was trying to contain her nerves, because now she was realizing what the second job interview was going to entail, and she had not prepared herself for this!

"You are Luo Qingyang, I presume," Professor Lan said, and inclined his head towards an unoccupied bench, where she could see a pitcher of iced tea and several glasses waiting. "Given the heat of the day, I thought we might conduct the interview here."

"This is lovely," she told him sincerely. Not only was the scenery gorgeous, but she could feel the cooler air wafting off the water, easing the weight of the summer heat. "You are Professor Lan Wangji, I assume." Then she looked deliberately past him, to the grey-eyed man who'd just lightly stepped onto the shore. "And I'm guessing that you'll be joining us, Wei Wuxian?"

He just blinked at her, but she saw several pleased smiles among the teenagers, and got the feeling that she'd just passed a test.

"Whyever would you think that?" Wei Wuxian asked, joining them with a bounce in his step.

She deliberately raised an eyebrow at him. "Because I wasn't born yesterday?" Then she tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Although, I suppose that *relatively* speaking…"

That earned her a cackle, and she grinned. The videos from the Three Gorges had shown that the man actually had a lively sense of humor, but she hadn't been sure how open he would be about it with someone new.

Oh, now she hoped that she really *would* get the job. She had the feeling that this was going to be *fun*.

Lan Wangji was not fiddling with his sleeves. Or panicking.

Chuckling, Wei Wuxian bumped his shoulder. "I never thought I'd see *you* nervous, Lan Zhan!"

Lan Wangji pursed his lips, fighting the pride that wanted to insist that he was *not* "nervous." Especially since honesty forced him to acknowledge that he was, in fact, somewhat… apprehensive. "What of you?" he asked instead. After all, this would be Wei Wuxian's first official public appearance.

Granted, by this point they both had some experience with more private gatherings. Among other things, with Xue Yang dead, Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan had been deputized to form a new task force to address the extremely awkward issue of, as Lan Jingyi had colorfully put it, "the Godzilla-sized giant evil turtle-monster thing!" that was contaminating one of the

most important watercourses in the nation, as well as interfering with the operation of the dam. By now, all of them were quite familiar with the engineers who maintained the dam, as well as the civil officials of Sandouping and other cities along the Yangtze, and Wen Qing was rapidly compiling a treatise on the diagnosis and treatment of contamination by resentful energy.

"Hm." Wei Wuxian tilted his head without pulling away, his presence a warm, solid weight against Lan Wangji's side. "I'm mostly curious, I suppose. Going out to answer the questions of ordinary people… the very idea would have horrified the sect leaders of my time!"

That, Lan Wangji did not doubt in the least. Frankly, he was fairly certain that there were no few modern government officials gnashing their teeth over the coming press conference. Especially since the audience was *not* simply ordinary people. There were no few foreign dignitaries and other notables in attendance. The government's normally tight control on information simply wasn't an option this time.

Ordinarily, it was unlikely a mere research project at a university would be able to do such a thing, no matter how famous its subject. But the government had lost a great deal of face with the very public exposure of Jin Guangshan's criminal connections, and the revelation of the giant monster sleeping in the Three Gorges reservoir had made a mockery of their claims of security.

Although even Wei Wuxian had been at a loss to explain how it could have gotten there unnoticed.

"To be honest, I'm not sure how it even got out of the cave where I first fought it! All of the openings were too small for it to go through." Wei Wuxian had smiled wryly. *"For that matter, I'm not sure how it got* into *the cave in the first place, not if its first rampage was as bad as the histories claimed."*

Which… was not a comforting thought. Especially with the knowledge that the ancient lure seal under the lake *was* going to fail; Wei Wuxian had confirmed that it would do more harm than good to try restoring or recreating it. Instead, they would have to take mitigating measures to prevent catastrophic failure and buy time for the country to prepare.

Including training new cultivators.

Which was why they were doing this. Wei Wuxian needed to be free to travel, to assess the situation on the ground and to respond to incidents as they arose. Which meant that he needed to step out and into public life at last.

…not that they would have been able to avoid it any longer after that dramatic appearance at the dam.

Lan Wangji understood why his presence was important. And he refused to leave Wei Wuxian to face the media alone. But a part of him desperately envied the boys, who were allowed to stay far, far away from the cameras.

Chuckling, Wei Wuxian reached over to poke at Lan Wangji's chest. "I don't think you need to worry much," he said with a grin. "They're going to be too busy staring in awe to ask you any questions!"

Lan Wangji closed his hand around Wei Wuxian's fingers before his partner could start toying with the buttons and gave him a *look*. When Wei Wuxian just pouted at him, eyes glinting mischief, he huffed internally – but very deliberately kept his grip on Wei Wuxian's hand.

They were taking the relationship slowly, not entirely by choice. With the most immediate threat of Jin Guangshan and Xue Yang dealt with, and in recognition of the fact that the Jingshi was *far* too small for five people to live there without catastrophic levels of crowd stress – especially when Ouyang Zizhen had decided to join them as well – the boys had been given permission to stay in one of the dormitories in the historic complex that once had housed monks that were normally reserved for guests visiting for conferences and retreats. But even with the added space, privacy was hard to come by. For one thing, even with the upgraded security on the dormitory – supplemented by Wei Wuxian's wards – the boys were still… somewhat skittish about the distance, a sentiment that Lan Wangji had to admit that he shared. As a result, they generally continued to spend their time at the Jingshi, training and doing homework and heckling each other as they went.

And sometimes other things, such as the wake they had held for young A'Qing, who, with her murderer and his patron dead and her friends safe, had passed on after saying her final farewells. Even knowing that she was at peace, Wen Yuan and his friends had been absolutely inconsolable – even Ouyang Zizhen, who never had the opportunity to meet her ghost.

(Lan Wangji did not object. Without A'Qing's help, they would not have freed themselves before the Xuanwu struck, and it was unlikely they would have been able to catch each other in the air. Proper respects and paper money to burn was the least they owed her.)

And then there was the fact that several hours of every afternoon had been dedicated to working with Luo Qingyang. Which he had thought he was handling gracefully enough, right up until an absolutely mortifying conversation where she had sat down and asked him if there was anything she needed to be aware of, given that he had been trying to kill her with his eyes for a week.

He recognized her expertise. He had recommended hiring her, and she had not disappointed. Her advice on the restructuring of the project had been invaluable. And he was truly impressed by the time and effort and sensitivity she had evidenced in structuring the oral history interviews in a way that both responded to the many historical questions that had been raised while also respecting the intensely personal nature of that history for Wei Wuxian. Luo Qingyang was an excellent addition to the project, and someone he felt honored to work with.

She was also very happily married. He *knew* that.

It was simply… far more frustrating than he had expected to see Wei Wuxian coming back to the Jingshi bright-eyed and bouncing after working with Nie Mingjue on the dormitory security system and enthusiastically talking about ideas for a ward that would activate a cell phone alert when triggered ("*So* much more useful than needing to carry a matching talisman, Lan Zhan!") or the possibility of creating cameras better suited to picking up various kinds of

energy at concentrations lower than *cataclysmic ghost from the ancient past* ("Though I think I need to learn more about electrical systems and film first… but Wen Ning says he has some old cameras that I can play with!") or an app version of his compass ("It'll probably eat up your battery charge, but I think it would finally solve the problem of needing a cultivator to activate it!"), and Lan Wangji *couldn't kiss him because someone was watching*!

Not that the relationship was a secret from the boys – and he suspected that Luo Qingyang at least suspected. But Lan Wangji was well aware that it was yet another aspect of the situation that could easily be misconstrued, and not without reason. Discretion was, for the time being, a necessity.

It was, Lan Wangji reminded himself firmly, a *good* thing. Wei Wuxian was finally getting his footing in the modern world and carving out a place for himself that was more than simply "scientific marvel from the past." He was building new relationships after losing so much to the passage of time. Lan Wangji was *happy* for him. And it wasn't that they hadn't been able to find some time, here and there, for… exploration.

But there was still a sulky part of him that longed for those early days when it had only been the two of them in the Jingshi with *no interruptions*.

Nie Huaisang said that he had a plan. Lan Wangji had not been able to decide whether the prospect inspired anticipation or dread. Wei Wuxian had laughed and declared it to be both.

Wei Wuxian chuckled and tugged playfully at his captured hand. Lan Wangji held his grip a moment longer, just *because*, and then let go as Wei Wuxian stepped away, turning to look at Lan Wangji with that odd, *quiet* expression that Lan Wangji had come to recognize as a tell that the man was thinking of the world fifteen hundred years ago.

Knowing that he would speak when he was ready, Lan Wangji waited. And, perhaps, took some pleasure at taking in the fine figure that Wei Wuxian cut in his new clothes. He could grant Nie Huaisang this much: Gao Huiqing did, in fact, know his craft.

Although it was… *gratifying* that the tailor had chosen to base his final product on the original outfit that they had acquired for Wei Wuxian. The cut of the charcoal grey silk jacket was different, allowing a full range of motion for the arms and shoulders, and the hem was slightly below the knee so that it was openly a *robe*, not a simple jacket, but Gao Huiqing had kept the overall design and colors. But the black trim of the jacket had been joined by black embroidery along the hems, creating a subtle water-ripple pattern with hints of cloud-shrouded mountains. Perhaps most astonishingly, Gao Huiqing had somehow managed to locate a cobbler who was able to make boots to replace Wei Wuxian's badly worn ones, without the modern touches that no one today cared to go without but that drove Wei Wuxian to distraction.

The greatest change, however, was the stark white dai tied with a soft blue sash, to replace Wei Wuxian's original dai – now tucked away in curatorial storage along with his weathered robes and those belongings that he did not mind giving up.

Professor Yao was *not* entrusted with their safekeeping. It was unlikely that he had been directly involved in Jin Guangshan's scheming, but the association combined with his initial

conduct had relegated him to only the most peripheral involvement with the project.

(They would never be able to know for sure how much had been Jin Guangshan's doing and how much Jiang Wanyin's ghost. But given that Jin Guangshan had stolen the Three Gorges Ring in the first place – not to mention his involvement with Xue Yang, which had apparently predated the theft of the Three Gorges Ring by several years – Lan Wangji was inclined to consider the association damning either way.)

Lan Wangji could not help his eyes lingering on the dai, and not just to appreciate the trim waist it was wrapped around. He had… complicated feelings about it, and what it implied.

Particularly in light of what he himself was wearing.

Wei Wuxian grinned, propping his chin on his hand. "You do look very *Lan* like that," he said, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "I think that Lan Yi would approve… once she got over the shock. That is very much *not* the Lan as they were!"

No, Lan Wangji would imagine not.

Fighting the urge to tug at his sleeves or straighten his collar, he considered his outfit. The overall shape of it was a Western suit, perfectly suited to such a formal occasion. But in the place of the usual black or grey, it was made of fine white silk, gleaming with subtle luster under the lights. In place of a tie, the suit showed the overlapped lapel of the evening-blue shirt underneath, giving the collar the same layered, wrapped look of traditional robes. Rather than pressed slacks, he was wearing loose-fitting pants similar to Wei Wuxian's, although in white rather than black – and tucked into shin-high boots of soft grey.

The most striking departure from a normal suit, however, would have to be the wide charcoal grey dai at his own waist, accented by a red sash.

It was almost jarringly comfortable to wear. Jarring, because Lan Wangji was acutely aware that what he was wearing would likely become the prototype for a cultivator's formal clothing in the future.

If he had ever had any doubt regarding that, the simple fact that the dai included fastenings for a sword would have disabused him of that notion.

Not that he was carrying a sword today. He was still learning the most basic steps of the modified sword forms that Wei Wuxian had created by blending Tai Chi and Lan sword styles, for one thing. And for another… they were still exploring their options for replacing Bichen's grip and scabbard. It was not something he wished to rush, after being granted the incredible honor of being permitted to use the ancient sword.

In all honesty, he had expected more resistance to his using Bichen, now that the sword was not only authenticated as genuine, but revealed to be a rare surviving cultivation artifact, but apparently the visuals of it leaping into his hand during the battle at the dam had been… impressive.

More to the point, however, he was acutely aware that he and Wei Wuxian were being presented as very much a matched set, even if Wei Wuxian's outfit was a traditional style with modern flair while Lan Wangji's was a modern style evoking the impression of traditional robes. Not to mention Lan Wangji's dark grey dai accented by red against Wei Wuxian's white and blue.

But he was also aware that the white dai was meant as a pointed reminder that Wei Wuxian was still mourning the loss of everything he had once known. Similar, the red of his undershirt had been darkened to near-black – maintaining the visual association but honoring the prohibition against bright colors. The circumstances might not allow him the grace of a full formal mourning period, but they owed him at least that much acknowledgement.

(There was a shrine in the Jingshi now, so that Wei Wuxian could pay his respects to those he'd lost to time. Although Lan Wangji had caught Jin Ling visiting it from time to time as well, when the boy thought no one was watching.)

"Does it bother you?" he asked. He knew that Wei Wuxian had provided suggestions and sketches of the Lan sect robes for Nie Huaisang and Gao Huiqing, so he had been aware that they were planning to evoke the image in Lan Wangji's suit. But knowing the plan was not the same as being confronted in person by the reminder of a lost friend.

(Lan Qiren had laid claim to one of the paintings of Lan Yi, and had submitted his own meticulously formulated research proposal regarding the pre-Tang history of the Lan as a cultivation sect. He had been beyond overjoyed when they had verified that sections of the upper cliff face had retained traces from the wall of rules that Wei Wuxian remembered. Although Wei Wuxian had whined vociferously when informed that Lan Qiren would be interested in receiving a list of what rules he remembered; apparently he'd made more than a few copies in his days as a troublemaking teenager and was not eager to repeat the experience.)

But Wei Wuxian just chucked. "Well. The Lan elders of my time would have had conniptions!" he said cheerfully – and obviously he'd been picking up vocabulary from Lan Jingyi again. "But… I think I like it. The world has changed! It would be silly not to change with it."

A knock interrupted them, and a moment later Mo Xuanyu opened the door and poked his head through.

He looked better now than Lan Wangji had ever seen him, having lost the vaguely hunted air that had always seemed to hover over his shoulders. Thanks, in part, to the shadow of Jin Guangshan no longer dogging his steps, but also because Lan Qiren had woken the morning after the Three Gorges incident, taken one look at his inbox, and had promptly stormed the bursar's office to declare that he would pay Mo Xuanyu's tuition *himself* if that was what it took to ensure that he would not have to do without his administrative assistant. On top of that, Lan Qiren had stepped in as Mo Xuanyu's thesis advisor. At this point, Lan Wangji was fairly sure that in Mo Xuanyu's eyes, Lan Qiren didn't *need* cultivation to walk on water.

"We're about ready now… oh. *Wow*." Stepping inside, Mo Xuanyu slowly looked both of them over, and *smirked*. "Oh, I can't *wait* to see people's faces when you two go out there."

Wen Ning followed him inside, clutching his camera nervously. One thing that had become abundantly clear as Wei Wuxian's presence became better known was that he did *not* appreciate having cameras shoved in his face… and he liked flash even less. And after all his work on developing wards that could integrate with cameras, it was child's play for him to make one that fried them instead. He had absolutely no qualms about using it.

So now Wen Ning was the official photographer for the project, because as a wildlife photographer he understood what *uninvasive* and *unobtrusive* meant.

Through the open door, Lan Wangji could hear his uncle beginning his opening statement. That was deliberate, so that the two of them could slip in and join the rest of the project leadership while the audience was distracted.

Wei Wuxian bumped his shoulder again. When Lan Wangji looked, he was met by a grin that was pure mischief. "Well, Lan Zhan… shall we go break some brains?"

Frankly, he would much rather stay right where they were and give Wei Wuxian a thorough demonstration of what he felt about that smile. But needs must.

So instead he simply said, "Let's." And started for the door as Wei Wuxian laughed.

END

NOTES:

Just a quick note: no, I have no plans to continue this AU. I've already told the part of the story that interests me!

How did the Xuanwu get into the lake unnoticed? …*cough* Insert Weird Hiccup In Reality handwave. As noted previously, sometimes you just roll with Rule of Cool.

(But seriously, how *did* it get into the cave in the first place? Lan Wangji mentions it's bigger than the records said, but it can't have been *that* small! It doesn't matter all that much in the novel, it's a Giant Monster Lurking in the Dark™, but when you stop and think about it… Did the original entrance cave in or something? Heck, how did Wen Chao even know that there was something there to find? Or was that just dumb luck?)

Yes, I gave Lan Wangji some black and red in his outfit. I get the power of an iconic appearance, of course, but really. He has no reason to wear Lan colors all the time here, so I decided to put him in Wei Wuxian's iconic colors for a change!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Since a number of people have asked, here is an annotated (and abbreviated!) list of some of the references that I've used. (NOTE: All the lecture courses are through The Great Courses.)

Most of these I actually *didn't* get into specifically for this fic. I started the general Chinese history lectures because MDZS gave me an excuse to start exploring an area of history that I didn't know all that much about, and the linguistics and other bits predate my discovery of MDZS entirely. (Yes, I'm a nerd, this should be a surprise to absolutely no one.) Which is what most of my "research" really is – me learning stuff for fun. As a result, I both have a rather eclectic base of knowledge to draw on, and more importantly, I usually know just enough to stop and go, "Huh. *Did* they have toilet paper in ancient China? Let's look it up… oh, hey, they did!"

(For fic-specific research, I usually start with a careful wiki-walk or judicious use of Google, and then bounce between that and my various source materials.)

A quick warning on books: I find the Wade-Giles system of romanization incredibly frustrating and actively avoid sources that use it. Unfortunately, this means that I'm functionally excluding anything written before the 1990s at the earliest. Which is frustrating, because the available translations of most folktales and ghost story collections predate the adoption of pinyin by Western scholars… (If you're curious, a quick way to ID the romanization used is to look for the word "dao" – if they spell it "tao," it's the Wade-Giles system; "dao" is pinyin.)

General Chinese History

Note: These are all lecture courses that I listened to during my commute. One thing that I recommend with these is to listen to two or three – and then go back and listen to them *again*. You'll get a lot more out of all of them on the second round, once you've had that first pass to get used to the names and the general timeline!

Understanding Imperial China: Dynasties, Life and Culture

In my head, this is the "basic" one, but it actually isn't. Lots of daily life details. Very handy!

Foundations of Eastern Civilization

Highly recommended for the lecturer's emphasis on the impact of geography and focus on core ideas. Has a very good set of lectures dedicated to the Han silk roads era from a wider perspective. However, a caveat: I can't speak to his Chinese or Korean pronunciation, but it's *painfully* obvious that this guy has no idea how Japanese pronunciation works.

Great Minds of the Eastern Intellectual Tradition

Very good overview of the main philosophical traditions (though he gives short shrift to Japan); also covers a much wider geographical range. Although I admit that I personally found his insistence on "so how can these ideas fit in *your* life?" to be irritating. Have you not heard of learning something just because you want to know more, sir?

Books that Matter: The Analects of Confucius

This one is a much narrower focus – I recommend listening to it *after* the others, and especially after *Foundations*. But it's a very, very in-depth look at the Confucian tradition, and it's really fascinating to juxtapose what's in the Analects against the traditions that developed over the centuries.

The Age of Disunity
(AKA the Six Dynasties, aka the Northern and Southern Dynasties, aka the Wei, Jin and Southern Dynasties…)

China Between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties, Mark Edward Lewis
If you decide to dig into this era in particular, this is a very good starting point; Lewis is a fairly accessible writer (by historical writing standards!) and it's well-organized and not too expensive. I'd also recommend the previous book in this series, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*, and the subsequent book, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dyansty*, both by Lewis as well.

China's Golden Age: Everyday Life in the Tang Dynasty, by Charles Benn
This isn't actually the Age of Disunity but the subsequent era, but it's handy for small details that tend to not get talked about in the history books (like toilet paper!). But it comes with a *massive* caveat: I lost all faith in the writer when I caught him citing *the parable of Cook Ding* as a source on what cooking methods were like, especially when he'd already quoted several sources that *screamed* political hyperbole with no discussion of their validity. Sir, at least give me *some* indication that you've applied a modicum of critical analysis to your sources, please… So, this has some good information, but read it with a healthy dose of skepticism!

The Cambridge History of China, Volume 2: The Six Dynasties
Warning. This thing is a *tome*. It is massive. And expensive. It is incredibly detailed. It is detailed to the point that it all blurs into a mental haze, and I honestly would recommend just *skipping* the first section on military and political history unless there's something you're actively looking for. (This is the book that inspired the comment about "horrifying and occasionally mind-numbing detail".) It is also extremely academic. But if you seriously want to dig into the close details (for example, this is where I got my info on Hou Jing!), it's hard to beat this, at least as far as English-language sources go.

Modern China

The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture, Kam Louie (ed)
Contemporary China: From 1949 to the Present, Gilles Guiheux
These two are more about political systems than daily life, but there's some interesting information in there and it's useful context for more general research (aka the internet).

Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future, Ian Johnson
Confession: I've only read the Kindle sample for this one. Be warned, it is *dark*. But it is a very good look at the impact of the Cultural Revolution.

Specific Topics

Chinese Medicine and Healing, An Illustrated History, TJ Hinrichs and Linda L. Barnes
Ironically, the biggest tidbit I got out of this was the detail about oracle bones being discarded because they were contaminated, which turned into the museum arc plot! Despite the title, I'd actually recommend this one for its insights into traditional modes of magic and folklore (which tend to be very closely intertwined with medicine).

Worldly Saviors and Imperial Authority in Medieval Chinese Buddhism, April D. Hughes
I'm pretty sure this was Hughes's dissertation; it reads like one! But it made for a very good close look at how religious rhetoric was used. This is where I got my information on Yang Jian's backstory that I used as a hook for the Yiling Laozu myth! (Also, some very good info on Wu Zetian and other female leaders.)

A History of the Chinese Language, 2nd ed, Hongyuan Dong
Language change in the Chinese context! (Though I freely admit that I skipped the specific phonetic analysis; that was a bit too detailed for me.) A good look at what we know about older versions of the Chinese language, and how we know it. That said, if you aren't already familiar with historical linguistics, I'd recommend listening to the lecture courses I listed below first.

The Story of Human Language
Language Families of the World
Both of these are audio courses by John McWhorter, who I find highly entertaining to listen to, and they're very good introductions to historical linguistics (aka language change), with some handy information on the specifics of how different languages work. (Honestly? If you want to learn a new language, I'd recommend listening to these first – it really helps to get an idea of *how many ways* a language can language!)

Writing and Civilization: From Ancient Worlds to Modernity
An audio course on the history of how writing systems develop. Fascinating on its own (and I've had several story ideas just listening to it!), but it also has a pretty good overview of how the Chinese writing system works. (…I think. I'd already learned how the characters worked back when I started teaching myself Japanese, so it might not be as clear to other people as it was to me.)

Customs of the World: Using Cultural Intelligence to Adapt, Wherever You Are
Just as the linguistics courses are good for wrapping your head around the ways other languages don't have to be like English, this is a pretty good intro to how cultures don't have to be like each other. Not the most in-depth, and beware of oversimplification, but an interesting framework for analyzing how a fictional society might work. (I actually found that it was also a very good framework for articulating the way that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian clashed – because while a lot of this is culture, a lot of it also reflects individual personality differences!)

Why Evil Exists
This is the audio course that I mentioned back with the oracle bones – it's surprisingly *not* depressing, at least until you get to the very recent stuff, and a very interesting look at the way Western (or at least Judeo-Christian) culture frames the problem of theodicy, aka bad

things happening to good people. Though I really wish it had gotten into other cultural traditions!

And just for fun… *Wired for Story* by Lisa Cron is an older book, but I found it an interesting perspective on what makes stories *work*. (Also some good advice on how foreshadowing works!) But I also recommend browsing TV Tropes and the Trope Talks playlist from Overly Sarcastic Productions on YouTube. The more you know about story elements and what they do, the easier it is to figure out if you want to include them, and how!

Works inspired by this one

[ART] For 'The Shade of Old Trees' by toffee_arts

[Podfic] The Shade of Old Trees by semperfiona_podfic (semperfiona)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!